

VOLUME 8

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The Red Ghost

Long ago, on the distant moon of Endor, there lived a tribe of small, furry, bright-eyed creatures called Ewoks. One sunny day in late autumn, three young Ewoks named Wicket, Teebo, and Paploo journeyed into the Endor forest on hang gliders to gather roots and nuts for winter. But when they landed in a clearing, they heard angry voices nearby.

"Those are Dulok voices!" cried Wicket. The Duloks were the nasty, warlike cousins of the Ewoks. They lived in a foul, bug-infested swamp beyond the forest.

"We'd better see what they're up to," said Paploo, and they hurried off.





The Ewoks crept into the forest silently. Ahead they heard the Duloks shouting wildly and crashing through the trees.

"Quick—hide!" whispered Paploo. "They're heading this way!" The Ewoks ducked behind a bush.

"It's the red ghost! Run for your lives!" shrieked the Duloks' King Gorneesh as he and his hunters came thundering by.

"Red ghost?" said Wicket. "I wonder what that was all about?"

"Let's find out!" said Teebo.

Not far away the Ewoks found a maramu stag tangled in a Dulok hunting net. The beautiful animal struggled helplessly, its large brown eyes filled with fear.

"The Duloks must be hunting for trophies again," said Wicket angrily. He couldn't understand why the Duloks killed animals for sport. Ewoks hunted only when there was nothing else for them to eat.

"Don't be afraid," Teebo said to the stag. "We'll help you." And he cut through the net with his knife.





Just then the Ewoks heard a strange, eerie howling and saw a flash of red fur coming at them through the treetops. An instant later a small but powerful-looking creature dropped to the ground in front of them. To their surprise, it was a female Ewok!

The Ewok girl seized Teebo's knife and snarled.

"She thinks we're trying to hurt the maramu!" said Teebo.

Suddenly a menacing wolflike creature bounded through the thicket and rushed to the Ewok girl's side.

"Oh, no! A korrina!" cried Wicket. "Let's get out of here!"

Wicket, Teebo, and Paploo raced back to their hang gliders. The mysterious Ewok girl and her korrina followed closely on their heels. Without a minute to spare the young Ewoks launched their gliders into the air.



“Whew! That was close!” said Wicket. He looked down and saw the girl standing high on the crest of a hill, watching them. Only moments before she had seemed fierce and wild. Now, strangely, she looked sad and lonely. “Who is she?” wondered Wicket as he banked his glider into an air current and soared home.





It was twilight when Wicket told his best friend, Kneesaa, about his adventure in the forest. Kneesaa was a princess, daughter of the Ewoks' Chief Chirpa.

"What did the Ewok girl look like?" she asked.

"Well, she had red fur, and she was about six snows older than you," said Wicket. "She must live out in the forest all alone."

When Kneesaa heard this, her bright eyes filled with tears. Without a word, she turned and ran into her hut.

Puzzled, Wicket followed. Kneesaa was crouching next to a trunk, holding a torn and tattered hood. She was crying. "Your story reminded me of Asha," she said finally. "My sister."

And then Kneesaa told of the sad day, many snows ago, when her mother and older sister Asha were lost to her forever.



"My mama, Ra-Lee, took us down to the river one day to gather pretty stones," said Kneesaa. "Asha found a blue one and tied it to my forehead with a vine. I still wear it to remember her by."

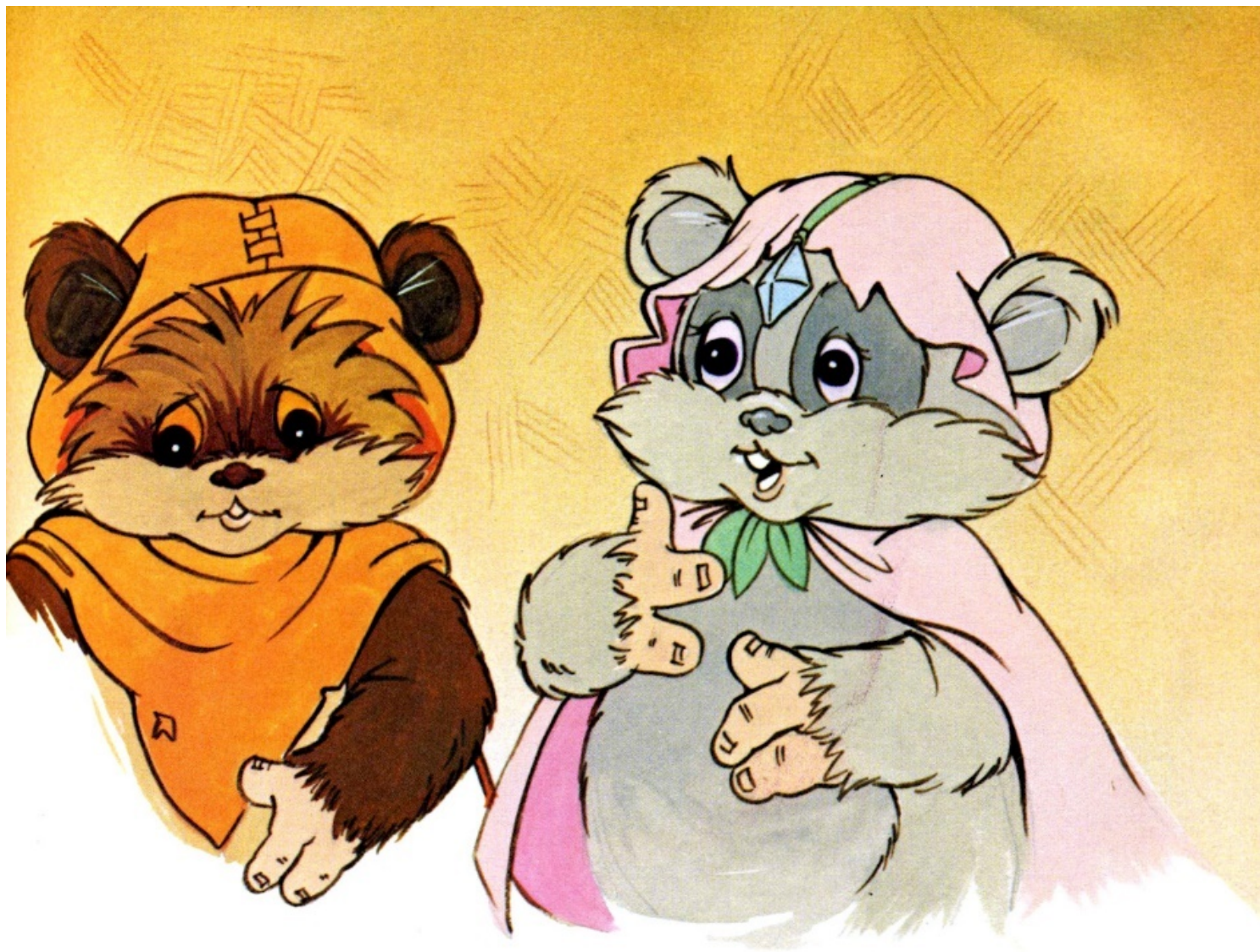
"What happened to her?" asked Wicket.

"She wandered away," said Kneesaa. "Then we heard her scream. She was being attacked by a hanadak!"

Wicket shuddered. "A hanadak! They're really scary."

"Mama tried to help Asha, but then the hanadak attacked her, too. She cried out to me to get help from the village. I ran as fast as I could, but when we got back it was too late. Mama was dead and Asha was gone."





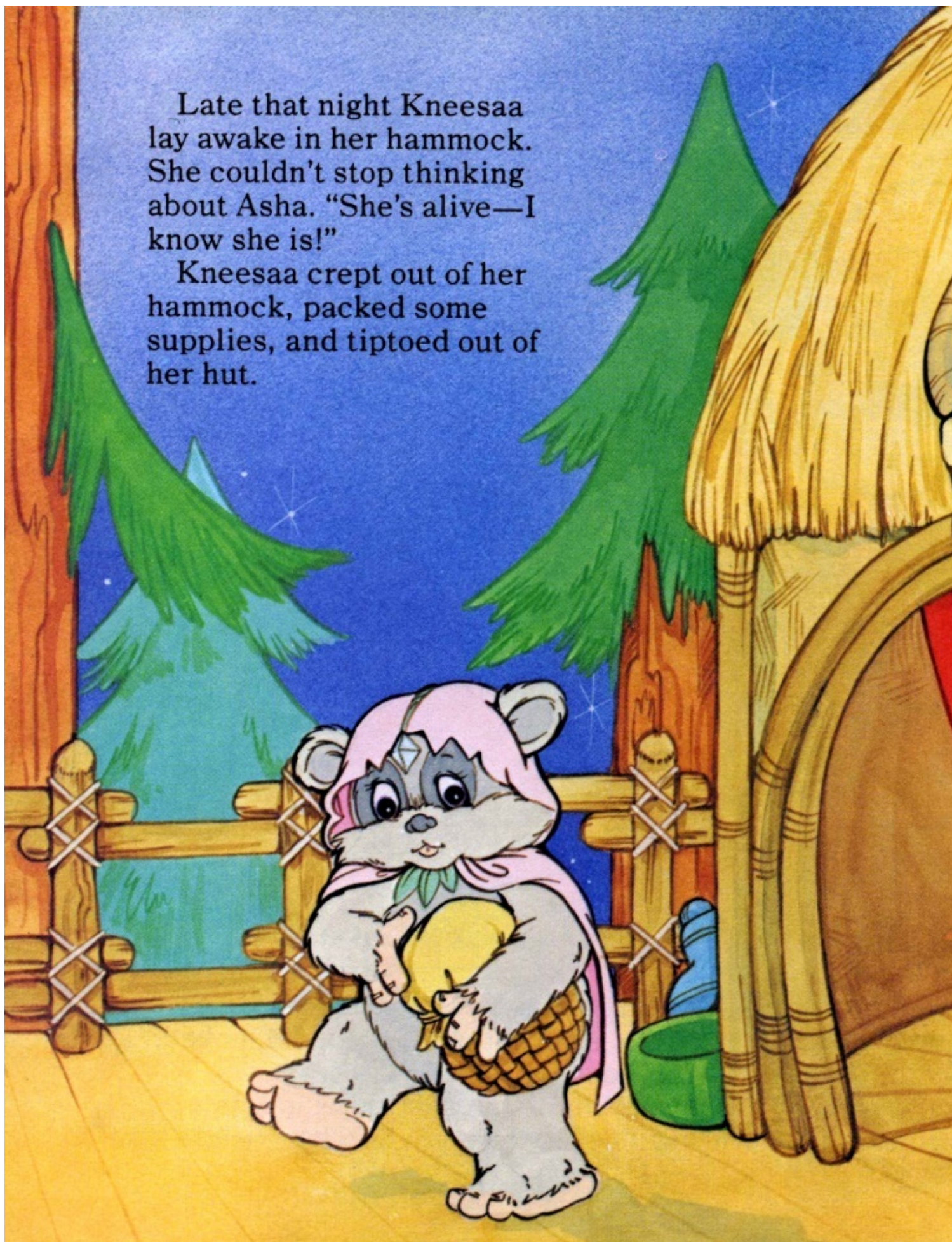
Wicket hung his head. He knew this was a hard story for Kneesaa to tell.

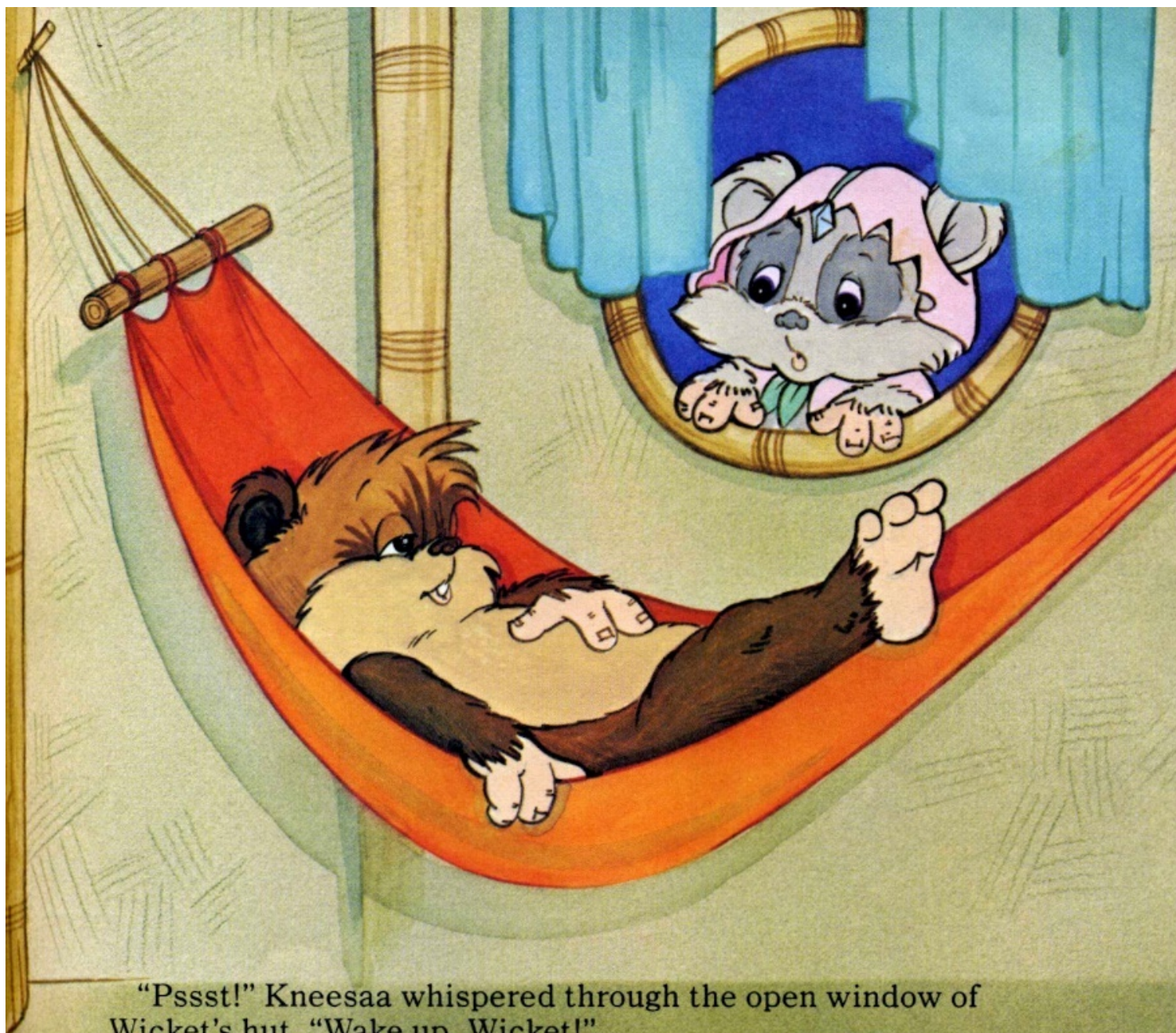
"We thought they both died that day," she continued. "But the search party never found Asha, though they looked and looked. All they found was this—her hood.

"But now, after what you saw in the forest, I think my sister might still be alive!" Kneesaa's eyes were bright with hope.

Late that night Kneesaa lay awake in her hammock. She couldn't stop thinking about Asha. "She's alive—I know she is!"

Kneesaa crept out of her hammock, packed some supplies, and tiptoed out of her hut.





"Pssst!" Kneesaa whispered through the open window of Wicket's hut. "Wake up, Wicket!"

"Kneesaa," mumbled Wicket sleepily. "What are you doing up so late?"

"I came to say good-bye," said Kneesaa. "I'm going to find Asha."

"Wait!" cried Wicket, leaping out of his hammock. But she was already gone. He pulled on his hood and hurried along the village platform after her.

Wicket was worried. The night was very, very cold. And the forest could be dangerous, especially after dark. "At least wait until morning, Kneesaa," he pleaded.

"No, Wicket," she said firmly. "I've got to know for myself about Asha."

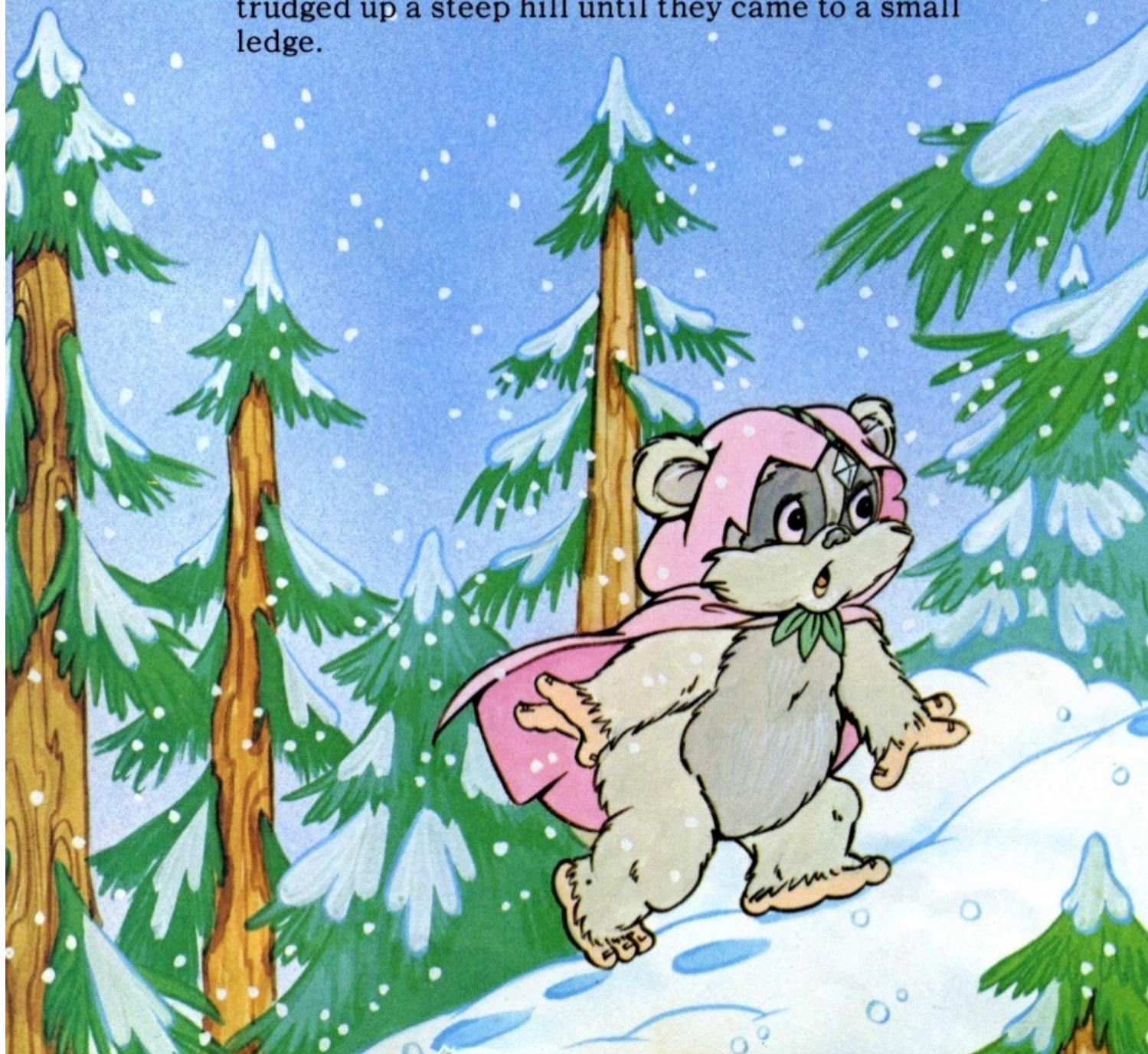
"Then I'm coming with you," he said.

Kneesaa smiled. "When the sun comes up, you can show me where you saw the Ewok girl."

As they set off into the dark forest, a light snow began to fall.



The snowfall became heavier, and blustery winds howled all through the night. By morning Wicket and Kneesaa knew they were lost. Cold and tired, they trudged up a steep hill until they came to a small ledge.



"I might be able to see our village from here," said Wicket, stepping onto the ledge. Suddenly it began to crumble! "Help!" he cried. As he pitched forward, a strong, furry arm dragged him back to safety.



Kneesaa hurried to Wicket's side and helped him to his feet. Through the swirling flakes they were both startled to see the face of the red-furred Ewok girl.

For a moment she stared at them curiously. Then she snarled and turned to run away.

"Wait!" cried Kneesaa.

The Ewok girl looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes grew wide as they focused on Kneesaa's face.





Kneesaa took a few steps forward. Then, slowly, the Ewok girl raised her paw to the blue stone on Kneesaa's forehead.

"Asha? Asha?" whispered Kneesaa.

"Nee . . . nee . . . saa," the girl managed with effort.

"Oh, sister!" cried Kneesaa.

Instantly Asha's face brightened, and she threw her arms around Kneesaa. Then she motioned for Wicket and Kneesaa to follow her.



Before long they came to a warm, brightly lit cave. A family of korrinas rested near a crackling fire.

"Ewoks," said Kneesaa, pointing to herself and Asha.

"I re-mem-ber," Asha stammered.

"I can't wait to tell Father about you," said Kneesaa happily.

"Fa-ther," said Asha, kneeling by the male korrina and stroking him.

"No," said Kneesaa gently. "Our father is Chirpa—and our mother was Ra-Lee."

At the mention of her mother's name Asha's face fell. "Ra-Lee. Gone." Then she pointed to the korrinas. "My family."

"But now you've found your real family!" said Kneesaa. "You can come home with us!"

Speaking slowly at first, Asha explained that the korrinas had cared for her after Ra-Lee died. Then she told Kneesaa that she would come home only if she could stop "the bad ones," the Duloks, from killing the forest animals.

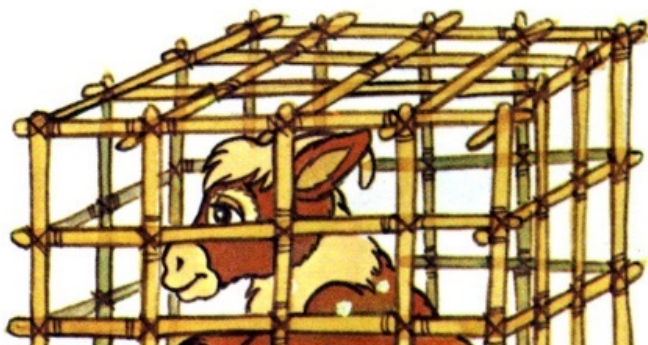
Wicket remembered the first time he had seen Asha, and how fiercely she had protected the trapped maramu. "If anyone can stop the Duloks, you can, Asha," he said. Then the fire died down and they all drifted off to sleep.



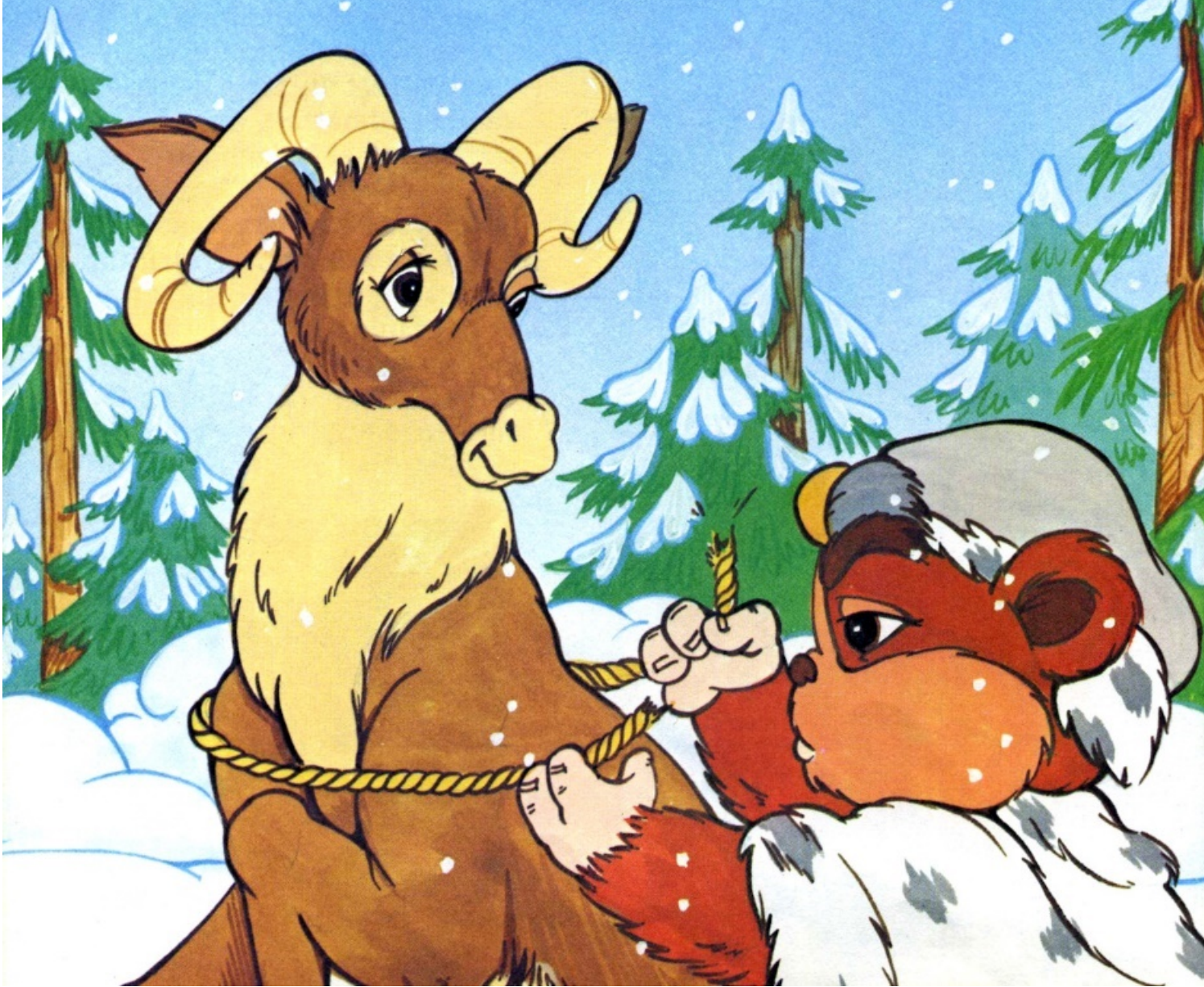


When the Ewoks awoke the next morning, Asha was gone. They rushed outside and followed her footprints to a snow-covered meadow. Below them, King Gorneesh and his hunters were inspecting their traps and rounding up maramus. Many small forest animals were caged and netted, and their frightened cries echoed through the valley. But what the Ewoks saw next made them gasp. Asha was striding across the meadow, right up to the Duloks!

"Hurry!" Kneesaa cried to Wicket as she raced down to the meadow. "Asha's going to need our help!"



But Asha needed no help. First she took the ropes that bound the maramus and tore them apart. Then she ripped open the nets and splintered the bars of the cages. The grateful animals quickly vanished into the forest.



"Just what do you think you're doing?" King Gorneesh demanded.

"They must go free!" Asha replied angrily.

"So, you're our little 'red ghost'—the one who raids our traps each season," said the king with a wicked smile. "Get her!" he shouted to his hunters.





The Dulok hunters were no match for Asha. She was quicker and stronger than they were. One by one she tossed them into their own pit trap! Gorneesh decided to make a run for it.

"Not so fast!" cried Asha, grabbing the king by his scruffy shoulders.

"Who are you?" croaked Gorneesh.

"I am Asha. Sister of Kneesaa, and daughter of the great Chief Chirpa!"

"And the creatures of this forest are under her protection—now and always!" added Kneesaa.

"Please, great warrior," pleaded Gorneesh, "we never meant any harm. We'll never hunt here again!"

Asha pitched the king into a snowbank and smiled as the frightened Duloks fled.

Kneesaa threw her arms around her sister.

"Now we can go home," Asha whispered.





The small band of Ewoks made their way through the snowy forest to the Ewok village with the korrinas loping along beside them. "Here we are, Asha—home!" said Kneesaa.



Asha blinked away her tears. She had not seen her village for many years. After saying good-bye to each member of her korrina family, Asha followed Wicket and Kneesaa into the village.



As they approached the chief's hut Kneesaa could hear her father pacing nervously inside.

"It's been a whole day, and our scouts haven't been able to find any sign of Kneesaa or Wicket," he said.

"We're back, Father," said Kneesaa, entering the hut.

"Kneesaa!" cried the chief, hugging her. "Where have you been? You should never have gone off like that!"

"I know . . . but I had to bring someone home again," she said.

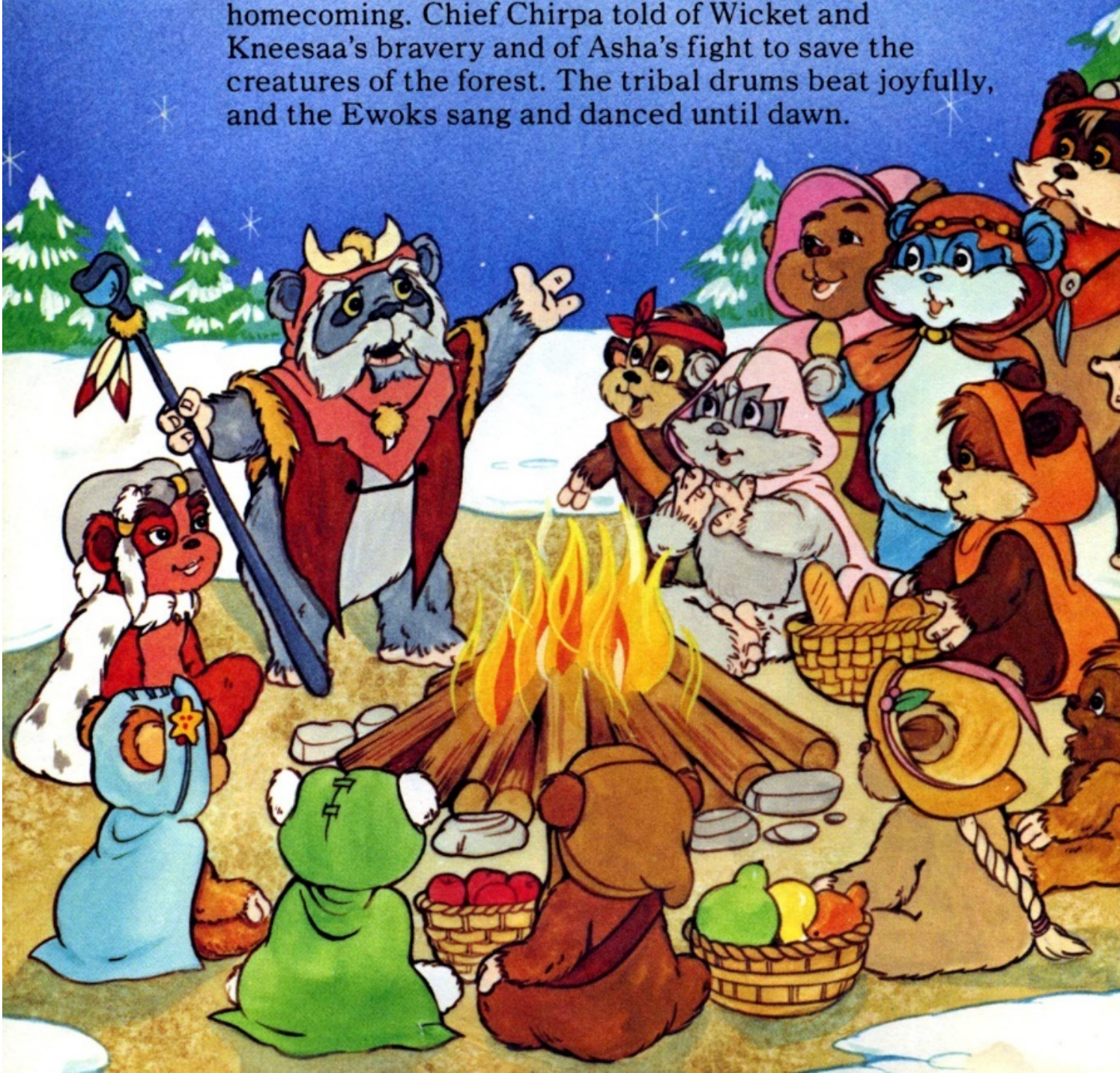
Asha stepped forward shyly.

"Hello, Father."

"Asha, my child!" The chief rushed forward to embrace her.



The next evening the Ewoks lit a bonfire and prepared a bountiful feast to celebrate Asha's homecoming. Chief Chirpa told of Wicket and Kneesaa's bravery and of Asha's fight to save the creatures of the forest. The tribal drums beat joyfully, and the Ewoks sang and danced until dawn.



Plaza Joven Spanish Novelization

Endor is a moon that is far, *very* far away from us. Upon it live some furry beings. They are the Ewoks. Their village resides upon the crown of the "Great Trees," which are their protectors, and which the Ewoks many times call upon, requesting help. The Ewok village is made up of wood huts atop platforms that encircle the trunk of a tree. The Ewoks' roads and plazas are also wooden. They often gather in the central grand plaza when they have to deal with some important matter or when they celebrate some festive day.

There, too, is where Ewok children listen to the stories of the Ewoks in ancient times ... tales of their ancestors told to them by Chief Chirpa or Logray, the medicine man. Around the fire, they hear the deeds of the brave Ewoks that made it so their village would live in peace and tranquility, something that is not so simple because there is an enemy that ... well, that is something we will see soon enough.

Chirpa is the chief of the Ewoks. They also call him the Wise One, because his

decisions are always on target, and all the Ewoks acknowledge that he is the best chief they could have possibly had. He has a daughter, Kneesaa, whose best friends are Wicket, Latara and Teebo.

Chief Chirpa also has another daughter, Asha, but for a long time everyone thought that she had died. Only Kneesaa's valor and determination succeeded in proving that it was not so, and Asha returned to the Ewok village beside her father and sister.

When Asha and Kneesaa were little, they went with their mother Ra-Lee to the river to collect small colorful stones. Then, a terrifying hanadak attacked them. Kneesaa ran to the village to look for help while her mother tried to protect Asha. But when the Ewoks arrived, Ra-Lee was dead and Asha

had disappeared. The years passed by, and one day Wicket, Teebo and Paploo saw in the forest a red-colored Ewok being followed by some korrinas and who was defending the forest animals: The Duloks—those belligerent warriors who are never happy except when hassling someone (the Ewoks and forest animals, above all)—had gone out to hunt. When Kneesaa heard this story, she immediately thought of her sister Asha and did not doubt it for a moment. She struck out in search, not giving a second thought to the heavily falling snow. Wicket did not want her to go alone, and so, they both pushed deep into the forest in search of Asha.

And they met with fortune: Asha

returned with them to the village—after saying goodbye to the korrinas, the noble animals that had saved her from the hanadaks and who had looked after her. That is why Asha loved the animals so much and did not allow them to come to the least bit of harm. That is why, countless times, she had confronted the Duloks, who feared her and called her the "Red Ghost." And that is also why the Duloks would flee as soon as they saw Asha appear with her family of korrinas.

Asha told all of this to her sister Kneesaa and the rest of the Ewoks the first nights after her return to the village. Now Asha lives happily with her sister Kneesaa and her father Chief Chirpa in

the Ewok village that resides upon the crown of the great trees.

Wicket is Kneesaa's best friend. They are always together, and they have reveled in many adventures. They like picking berries and fruits in the forest; they like picking flowers to give as gifts to their friends, and they like scampering from one place to another. Wicket has two brothers, Weechee and Willy, and one baby sister, Winda. Their parents, DeeJ and Shodu, love them very much and are very proud of their children ... even though they sometimes get themselves into trouble. Like that one time Willy sipped a bit of the potion that the medicine man Logray was preparing: He blew up like a balloon, and they had to tie him down with a rope, lowering him and letting him rise until the effects wore off. Of course, it's an ill wind that blows no

good: In this manner, Willy managed to get to the nest of the lantern bird and nab one of its feathers. For what reason did he want it? Nothing less than to save his father DeeJ: He was very sick, and Logray needed three things in order to make a potion and cure him.

These three things were: a feather from the lantern bird, which Willy acquired; a yellow dandelion's starred quill, which Wicket acquired, and the egg of a ranal (an animal that lived in caves filled with water), which Weechee ran great risk to acquire.

The three of them demonstrated much valor and saved their father. Of course, they had very important support: Kneesaa, Latara and Teebo all accompanied them. But above all, it was a kind and mischievous Gupin (a forest sprite) that lent them an incalculable help.

All of this happened in the village of the Ewoks. They find solutions to all problems thanks to their valor and the friendships they keep among all the Ewoks. But other beings live on Endor, too.

On Endor lives Morag, witch of the Gulas and enemy of the medicine man Logray, because her sorcery—which she uses to persecute the Ewoks—is no match for Logray's magic, which he only uses toward good ends: helping everyone, curing them, preparing remedies, and even entertaining the Ewok children with magic tricks, like those he performs the day of The Festival of Wonders.

The Duloks also live on Endor. They inhabit a marshy swamp, and they are always preparing traps for the Ewoks. As soon as they see an Ewok, they throw themselves at him to make him a prisoner. At other times, the Duloks go and look for Ewoks to force them to work.

The king of the Duloks is Gorneesh. One day, Gorneesh and his wife Urgah were in their lair. The little Duloks were latched onto their mother all day long. They were very naughty. Well, not naughty: They were simply evil. And Urgah was fed up with them. She could not take anymore.

"Monsters! Miscreants! No one can stand you!" Urgah yelled. And speaking to Gorneesh, she added, "I warn you, Gorneesh! If you don't bring me a babysitter to look after them, I won't ever make food for you again."

Gorneesh scratched his head ... and came up with a diabolical idea.

"Don't worry, woman. I just thought of something.... *Guards!*"

Upon hearing their king's voice, the guards entered Gorneesh's lair and awaited their orders.

"I have an assignment for you. Urgah needs a babysitter and—"

"Oh, no! Order us to do anything else but that! No one can stand those snot-nosed brats!" The savage Duloks yelled.

"Silence!" Gorneesh interrupted them. "You're a couple of blockheads! What you're going to do is go to the village of the Ewoks and kidnap a babysitter."

"Hee, hee, hee! You're the smartest!"

"And the most depraved of them all!"

The two Duloks departed in search of a babysitter to look after the Dulok children. That way, Urgah could get free

of them and continue cooking for King Gorneesh.

Lalara was very unaware as to what destiny had in store for her. She had no idea that her wish to be an artist would lead her on an immensely dangerous adventure, which she might only escape with great difficulty.

Lalara liked playing the flute. She spent all the time she could practicing because she wanted to become an accomplished artist. Not everyone on Endor approved of her hobby. For example, her father Lumat.

"Lalara! You still haven't finished your chores," Lumat said to her one day.

"I'm practicing. The munyips and these little forest animals are my audience."

"Well, you can keep practicing when you finish straightening up the house. Enough of that noise!"

And Lalara had no other choice but to leave her practice for later and begin to clean the house. Later, her friends appeared.

"Lalara!" Wicket called. "We're going to look at Paploo's new raft. Want to

come?"

"I have a lot of work. I have to clean the whole hut."

"When you finish, you can come by our huts and clean them, too," Paploo said, laughing.

"Wait! I know a new song," Lalara stopped cleaning and began playing the flute.

Her friends did not seem to like her music very much.

"That's ... well, we've got to get going," Wicket said.

"Yeah, let's go," added Teebo.

"We'll see you later," Kneesaa said.

"I can't stand the flute!" Paploo growled.

And they left hurriedly. Lalara was in a huff.

"Fine! One day, you'll want me to play for you. One day, you'll beg me to play for you!"

Lalara continued cleaning the hut. A short time later, Zephee came in to ask her to watch over Nippet and Wiley.

"I have to go out to do some things, and I want you to watch them for me while I'm out. See you later, Lalara."

As soon as their mother left, Nippet and Wiley fell upon Lalara, shouting.

"Yipeeeeee! Lalara, look!"

They were very unruly and made a great deal of noise. Because she could not get them to sit still, Lalara decided to take them to the river for a stroll and see if that would calm them.

"Uh, boys! Let's go for a walk."

"Alriiiiiight!" Nippet and Wiley cried.

Upon arriving at the riverbank, Lalara said to them:

"Let's go sit on that rock over there. I'll play you a pretty little song that I

came up with on my flute."

But Lalara had not noticed that two pairs of eyes were watching her from among the trees: It was the Duloks that had gone out in search of a babysitter for Gorneesh's children.

"Look what we have here! An Ewok babysitter! We found what we were looking for! Follow me, and don't make any noise."

They crawled in silence until they were near Lalara.

"Hee, hee, hee!" One of the Duloks laughed. But a loud noise cut short his

laughter. "What are you doing, gourd-head? You're making more noise by yourself than a whole herd of hanadaks!"

"But it wasn't me!" The other Dulok replied in surprise.

"Then...?"

They turned around and were left terrified: A giant caravan of awors was heading toward the Ewok village.

"Quick! Let's get out of here before they see us."

"I told you it wasn't me that was making all that noise."

And they hid themselves among the

trees.

Lalara had also heard the noise. The little Ewoks started shouting:

"Look, Lalara!"

"What is that?"

"Let's return to the village and find out," Lalara said.

They just made it when those strange beings were nearing the bases of the trees: singing and sounding their musical instruments. Some were on foot and others were mounted on the awors, which were loaded with very big bundles and even with huts. All the inhabitants of the

village had come down from the trees in order to see who these beings were and what they wanted. Chief Chirpa and the medicine man Logray were at the head of the Ewoks.

The one among these strangers who looked like their chief shouted through a megaphone that made his voice resonate throughout the trees.

"The life of a Jinda is a paradise of amusements!"

"For us, work and performing are the same!" The others sang in harmonious chorus.

"Come one and all! Come and admire the greatest spectacle on all of Endor. The most spectacular spectacle of all spectacles! Because to your village have arrived, the most famous, the most admired, the most entertaining, the best—the Travelling Jindas!"

Chief Chirpa did not look very happy. He scowled, and when this being that was saying he belonged to a tribe called the Jindas fell silent for a moment, Chirpa addressed him with a strong voice:

"Can I ask who you are and, above all, for what purpose precisely you have come

here?"

"I am the great Bondo, and I come with my Travelling Jindas! Surely you have heard tell of us! We are supremely famous performers. Everyone the world over adores us."

Lalara listened to him, spellbound. Little by little she made her way to the front row.

"We go from village to village," Bondo continued, "offering our first-class spectacle, our wondrous attractions. And now we offer them to you lucky

inhabitants of these marvelous lands! And the only thing we ask in return is that you grant your hospitality for one night."

"Please, Chief Chirpa! Let them stay!"

Lalara then said.

"Oh! Who is this charming young lady?" asked Bondo.

"I'm an artist, too!"

"Well, then maybe I'll sign an autograph for you later. Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Jindas may stay for one night," pronounced Chief Chirpa.

"Thank you, a million thank yous!

Come out of your houses, forget your worries! Ewoks, come all: The Travelling Jindas have arrived!"

And that night, the Jindas put on a show. All the Ewoks went to see them. And, of course, Lalara was in the front row with her friends Wicket, Kneesaa, Teebo and Paploo.

When the time came for the performance to begin, Bondo addressed the spectators:

"Welcome to the greatest spectacle on Endor! The Travelling Jindas will offer

you their greatest acts, the most wondrous attractions.... To start, behold Chituhr and his trained ferrets."

The Ewoks were very serious. Those animals were very fierce and could be dangerous. But when the Ewoks saw them upon the stage, they relaxed: The ferrets had not the slightest appearance of being ferocious. Moreover, they immediately started turning somersaults, leaping and doing everything that Chituhr ordered them to.

It was so delightful seeing those animals play on the stage as if they were

rollicksome kids. Upon finishing his number, Chituhr saluted, and the ferrets lined up and saluted the Ewoks as well, who commenced applauding with terrific enthusiasm.

"And next, the strong, the most brave, the amazing Trebla, accompanied by the Jinda ballerinas!"

And, one after another, the acts kept coming. Upon finishing, Bondo and all the performers took their leave of the audience.

"Thus ends another fantastic spectacle of the Travelling Jindas! Thank you,

thank you, we accept all manner of reward! Ha, ha, ha!"

The Ewoks were very excited, commenting as they left.

"That was stupendous! Right, Lalara?" Kneesaa asked. "Lalara...?"

"Where did she get off to now?" said Wicket.

In their excitement, they hadn't noticed that Lalara had gone off to look for the Jindas. While trying to locate Bondo, and very determined, she was saying to herself:

"If no one here can appreciate my

music, I'll go someplace else where the talent of good artists gets recognition...."

The following day, while the Jindas were preparing to depart, Chief Chirpa thanked them for the show they had put on.

"In the name of all the Ewoks, thank you for the magnificent performance that you gave us last night!"

"Of course it was magnificent! Ha, ha, ha! Everyone the world over likes the Travelling Jindas. Even the Jindas like the Travelling Jindas! Ha, ha, ha," replied

Bondo, who always laughed at his own witticisms.

The Ewoks were so interested in the Jindas' preparations for departing—contemplating their trained animals, the bundles and huts the awors transported, and Bondo's jokes—that they did not notice that Wicket, Teebo and Kneesaa had strayed off, looking at one of the Jindas' storage chests. What very interesting thing was in that chest, such that only the three of them paid it any attention?

Very simple: Hidden in that chest was Lalara. Lalara had decided to depart with the Jindas in search of the fame she could not attain in the Ewok village. She wanted to play the flute and be admired by the public, and she believed that with the Jindas she could accomplish that. Her three best friends were trying to convince her not to leave.

"You're absolutely sure, Lalara?" asked Kneesaa.

"Absolutely. On all of Endor, there are no other artists like the Jindas. They

know how to recognize good and true artists. Besides, I'll only be gone the time necessary for my talent to be appreciated. Afterward, I'll tell the Jindas to bring me back to the village."

"That path is bizarre ... for becoming a star," said Teebo, who had poetic tendencies.

"But remember that you all promised me not to say anything to anybody," Lalara admonished.

The three friends, once again, repeated their promise:

"We promise, Lalara. Don't worry."

But she would not be able to be so free from worry. There was a pair of beings that had not moved from their hiding place since the previous day and who now saw a more favorable opportunity to complete the mission with which they had been charged. They were the two Duloks that King Gomeesh had sent in search of an Ewok babysitter.

"Hee, hee, hee! This is going to be easier than we thought. All we have to do is follow the Jindas' caravan and seize the

babysitter at the first opportunity."

The caravan had begun to move now, and Bondo was taking his leave with the last of the jokes he could think of:

"So long, Ewoks! And never doubt that the Travelling Jindas are the best of the best artists on Endor! Don't forget it. Oh! And tell all your friends, too! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Chief Chirpa laughed. "Never have I seen anything so entertaining as the Jindas."

"And it would be a miracle if you ever

see them again," Logray said.

"A miracle? What do you mean?"

"The Jindas are famous for their ability to get ... hopelessly lost. When they leave a location, they never return to it."

"Is it really possible that they never return to the same location? That they have no friends to visit?"

Logray gave an understanding smile in response to the astonishment his words produced in Chief Chirpa. "It's true, old friend," Logray explained. "The Jindas do not have friends in the places where they

go to perform, for the simple reason that the friendships they make when they are in a village are lost when they never return."

Chief Chirpa shook his head dubiously.

"The life of a Jinda must be a very sad one, despite how much they laugh! We have our forest, our homes, our families and friends. If we like, we travel and make excursions and also, if we desire it, come together with our friends around the heart of a fire to recount old stories! In reality," continued Chief Chirpa, "I think the Ewok people are much freer and merrier than the Jinda people, despite appearances to the contrary."

"How right you are, Chirpa!"

Poor Lalara! Grave perils were lying in wait for her. If the Duloks—who meant to abduct her in order to condemn her to live forever as a babysitter for the children of King Gomeesh—did not achieve their purpose, she would wind up a nomad with the Jindas for the rest of her life and would never again return to the Ewok village.

Was there anything that might prevent these calamities? Would anyone be able to find her? And if the Duloks were to succeed in their purpose, who would dare to penetrate the marshy lands of the Duloks to rescue her? She had gone out in search of fame with the intention of returning quickly to her friends' sides, but how would she do it?

Nevertheless, Lalara was still happy with the Jindas. She was very unaware of the dangers to which she was exposed, and she believed that they would soon acknowledge her artistic virtues and talents and that in the next spectacle she would get to play her flute. Although it

seemed that Bondo did not share the same opinion she had when it came to her art, either.

Within Bondo's hut, which was built upon the back of a grand awor, the comedic chief of the troupe was comfortably seated on a giant cushion while Latara devoted herself to ... washing clothes!

"Good, little Ewok. How do you like the life of a Jinda? Don't you find it enjoyable? Are you happy you came with us?"

again! Soaked, they got out of the river and resolved to wait for another opportunity to achieve their objectives. Who would be able to thwart them in this? Who could return Latara to her village?

Wicket, Kneesaa and Teebo had not kept their promise. Upon learning that the Travelling Jindas never returned to a place once having been there—because they did not know how to find the appropriate roads and because their defining characteristic was to remain forever lost—they ran to tell Logray

them with care, and, whatever you do, don't let them get wet, unless—may the Light Spirit forbid it!—unless you need to."

"Need to? What would we need it for?" Kneesaa asked, while hanging the pouch around her neck.

"To flee! If you find yourselves in trouble ... you need only throw them on the ground, where there is water, and then run as fast as you can! Goodbye and good luck! I'll explain to your parents everything that's happened. May the

"This ... washing clothes isn't exactly the idea I had of the life of an artist. I still haven't had a spare minute to play the flute!" Latara complained.

"Ah! But don't forget that a Jinda's life is merry because work and performing are ... come now, you say it," Bondo said.

"Because work and performing are the same, I know. But, truthfully, I had a lot less work at home than here. I don't see what I've gained from the change."

"Don't worry.... I am Bondo, Chief of

about Latara's departure. Paploo, the scout, was also with them. Logray was left very worried upon hearing this.

"Young ones, this has the potential to become something very serious."

"Oh, poor Latara!" Kneesaa cried.

"Foolish Latara is more like it!"

Logray barked. "The Jindas are never actually *going* anywhere. They are always wandering aimlessly. And in their company, Latara is heading straight into the arms of the Night Spirit."

Light Spirit protect you!"

The four friends departed with the precious seeds, on the trail of the Travelling Jindas. They knew it was not going to be easy, but they were determined to find Latara. No danger, no fear could hold them back.

The Jindas were already far away, but Bondo's nature did not allow him to be idle. He planned to stop for the night and put on a show. And that is what he told Latara:

"Tonight we'll give a performance!

the Travelling Jindas, and I will see to it that your desires to perform are fulfilled."

Latara was not very convinced that was true, but for the moment she had no other choice but to go on washing clothes.

There were other desires that seemed on the verge of fulfillment: those of the evil Duloks. As soon as Latara remained alone, they ran through the tree branches toward the hut to trap her. But this they did not achieve. They had chosen their timing poorly, because the caravan was crossing a bridge, and the two Duloks ended up in the water. They had failed

"We have to go out and look for her!" Wicket exclaimed.

"Let's go! It won't be too difficult to follow the Jindas' tracks," Paploo said. "It hasn't been long since they left."

Logray then turned to one of his racks and picked up a pouch. Handing it to Latara's valiant friends, he told them:

"It will be best if you take this with you."

"What is it, Logray?" asked Wicket.

"They are some magic seeds. Take

That way, you'll know the true life of a Jinda. The applause ... the gifts they throw your way ... ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, finally I'm going to perform! Tonight I'll get to perform! Where is it going to be, Bondo?"

"Who knows? And anyway, who cares? Ha, ha, ha!" And Bondo commenced shouting out of his megaphone: "We've arrived! We'll perform here. Ha, ha, ha! Tonight we'll perform for ... ha, ha, ha, for the trees and for the animals! Don't you see how bored they are?"

"Hmmm, I'd better go rehearse, just in case," Latara said.

Then Bondo took the flute from her hands:

"Tonight you won't be playing. Tonight you're going to be ... Trebla's assistant!"

Trebla fit her with a kind of harness. Latara was very puzzled.

"What is this? Magic?"

"It's the world of entertainment, little one," answered Bondo, without further explanation.

Even though the life of an artist was

not—at least among the Jindas—like what Latara had imagined, she retained a fervent hope to perform on the stage. She imagined to herself that, with the sweetness of her flute, she would be able to curb the Jindas' merry insanity. Because according to Latara, an artist should be able to produce in her spectators guffaws of laughter or floods of tears, melancholy or righteous indignation. A true artist should be able to express and make her audience feel every imaginable mood. To Latara, the Jindas were somewhat like artists doing things by halves.

Yet, Latara was not happy. And she was even less so after that night's spectacle. She had to perform before the forest animals, hanging from a rope, and she was very scared. It had not been all she had hoped for.

When the show finished, she went to Bondo and said to him:

"Bondo, I don't know how to begin but ... I want to go back home! I still haven't been able to play my flute, and the only thing I do is work all day. Please, Bondo, take me home!"

"Poor thing!" Bondo responded. "I would gladly do so ... if I knew how. But, frankly, I must tell you that we're lost."

"Oh, no! It can't be!"

"I haven't the slightest idea where it is we find ourselves," Bondo added.

"What will become of me? I won't be able to go back to the Ewoks!" Latara began to cry.

"Don't cry. You'll see how you grow accustomed. And, in the end, you'll wind up liking the nomadic life of a Jinda."

"I won't ever see the Ewoks again!

Wicket, Kneesaa, Teebo, Paploo.... I'll never see them again!" Latara dashed off. She sat herself on a rock and cried, cried and cried inconsolably. And she did not notice that two odd figures were closing in on her from behind, grabbing her and covering her mouth.

"Don't scream, Ewok! We'll protect you. Hee, hee, hee!"

Latara had fallen into the hands of the Duloks. While she would no longer wander aimlessly with the Jindas, her luck had just taken a turn for the worse. She was now in the power of the evil

Duloks. She knew not what awaited her in the repugnant bog where those soulless warriors—those enemies of the Ewoks!—lived.

Meanwhile, Wicket, Kneesaa, Teebo and Paploo had followed the Jindas' tracks. The magic seeds remained in the pouch that Kneesaa bore around her neck—they had been on the verge of falling into the river, though, when they crossed a rope bridge, and Kneesaa lost her balance. Fortunately, Teebo, Wicket and Paploo had seen to it that she neither

said, laughing.

They ran to explain the plan to Bondo, who did not seem entirely convinced. But the Travelling Jindas wanted to help Latara.

"I hope your plan works, Ewoks. It's my understanding that the Duloks are plenty dangerous," Bondo said.

"We don't have any other alternative. If they see through our trick, we're doomed," Wicket said.

"All of us could be doomed then!"

Kneesaa sighed.

While the Jindas set off on the path

fell into the water nor the seeds got wet. They did not know what might happen should they get doused, because Logray had not told them. But if Logray warned them of the seeds' danger, they felt no need to confirm it ... only if they needed to escape would they allow them to get wet.

After the incident at the bridge, the four Ewoks continued walking. Suddenly, they heard noises.

"There are the Jindas!" Wicket exclaimed.

Sure enough, they had spotted the Jindas' caravan. But they also spotted the two Duloks that were taking away Latara.

"Quick, hide!" Wicket said.

They hid among the shrubs so as not to be discovered by the ferocious Duloks.

"We have to save Latara!" Kneesaa whispered. "We can't let the Duloks take her."

"Let's go after them!" Paploo said.

"Wait! I have an idea. The time has come for the Travelling Jindas to perform for the Duloks. And this time, they're going to have guest artists..." Wicket

toward the Dulok swamp, Latara found herself before King Gorneesh.

"Ewok, you already know that we Duloks love torturing your kind. And I've thought up the *most* exquisite of tortures for you. You're going to be the Dulok cubs' babysitter.... Ha, ha, ha!" King Gorneesh laughed malevolently. And the Dulok brats hurled themselves upon Latara, biting her and delivering kicks. "Ha, ha, ha! You better treat them well. Or else...."

Latara thought that she would no longer be able to free herself from the evil Duloks. Her destiny would consist of

watching over those unpleasant brats ... and if she treated them badly, the Duloks would lock her up or were even liable to kill her.

"What will become of me?" Latara groaned.

She would very soon find out. Her friends were not willing to let her remain in the Duloks' power. And her friends were now not just Wicket, Kneesaa and Paploo: All the Jindas, with Bondo at the lead, were going to risk themselves in order to save Latara. She was quite surprised upon hearing Bondo's laughter, shouted through his megaphone.

"Greetings, Duloks! How are things marching along in the swamp? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who dares ask such a question?" answered an irritated Gorneesh.

"My dear Dulok, we're the Travelling Jindas, and we bring you a spectacle greater than you've ever imagined," Bondo answered.

"A spectacle? With love songs?" Urgah barged in. "Oh, Gorneesh, let them stay! They're so charming. I would like to watch their show. Please, Gorneesh....!"

"Alright. You can camp in the swamp.

And your spectacle better be truly entertaining. If not...."

Gorneesh did not finish the sentence. Instead, he loosed a diabolical burst of laughter that made the Ewoks tremble. Bondo was not very relaxed either, but he ordered the Jindas to quickly prepare everything for the production.

Just before starting the performance, Bondo and the four Ewoks finalized the details of the plan. Wicket peeked through a slit in the curtain and was able to see Latara surrounded by the Dulok cubs:

"There's Latara! Let's hope this works."

Bondo came out onto the stage to kick off the spectacle. He did not know that the Duloks were not a very pleasant audience. As soon as he began talking, they commenced hurling tomatoes and fruit. They practically did not let him speak:

"Welcome to our show, Duloks! Oh, ha, ha, ha! Tomatoes! Thank you very much! But now you will see the Travelling Jindas' wondrous spectacle, the greatest of all that can be seen on Endor. First, Chituh and his ferocious ferrets...."

"Food! Those animals look good!" Yelled one Dulok while running toward

the stage. He meant to grab them, but they started to growl and attack him. The Dulok retreated and fell, and all the Duloks laughed at him like crazy. The audience continued behaving the same way throughout the entire show, until Trebla's turn came along with his assistants, the four Ewoks.

"I wish you luck, Ewoks," Bondo said to them.

"We're wishing for it, too!" The four Ewoks answered as one.

"And now, dearest and kind Duloks, the magician Trebla! But first, I need an

assistant for Trebla. What do you think, young lady ... would you help Trebla with his act?" Bondo said, addressing Latara.

"Me? Oh, no, I don't want to be Bondo's helper again!" Latara cried out.

"Get up there immediately, Ewok!" Gorneesh growled.

No sooner did she get up onto the stage than Trebla put the rope on her again, and the Ewoks began tugging at her in order to lift her up and make her disappear. But something was not working: The rope had a knot, and Latara

got stuck hanging. So Bondo, in order to give the Ewoks time to solve the problem, directed himself to the audience, which continued behaving brutally.

"And now a beautiful song!"

Latara commenced playing the flute amid the hissing and booing of the Duloks, who did not seem to appreciate her art either. But Urgah wanted to listen to the music, and the Duloks' shouts were preventing her from doing so.

"Gorneesh, they're not letting me hear this pretty love song!"

"Silence! Silence, Duloks!" Gorneesh

yelled, infuriated. Terrified, the Duloks shut up.

Paploo was trying to undo the knot, but the rope ended up snapping, and the four Ewoks fell to the stage. The Duloks then saw that among the Jindas there were also Ewoks.

"Ewoks! Capture them!" Gorneesh roared.

The Duloks launched themselves at the Ewoks while the Jindas began preparing their flight, leaving the stage and all their things behind. Bondo began siccing the awors on the Duloks, who

stayed back, struck with terror. Gorneesh, continued screaming at them:

"What are you doing, tree-heads! Capture the Ewoks before they escape! Cut them off! Follow them through the swamp!"

The Ewoks ran through the swamp, but Kneesaa got caught up in the mud. Wicket, Teebo and Paploo ran to help her, but she was trapped, and there was no easy way to free her. The Duloks were getting closer.

"Leave me! Save yourselves!" Kneesaa yelled.

Then Wicket seized the bag of magic seeds while the others finished getting Kneesaa out.

"Wicket, wait! Don't do it!" Kneesaa shouted. But Wicket was not willing to let the Duloks nab them. Now the Duloks would witness what Logray's magic could do. He threw the seeds into the water, and some giant creeper vines immediately began to grow, which cut off the Duloks' path and began to coil up around their bodies.

"Run! The creeper vines will take care of the Duloks!" Wicket said.

A little while later, the Ewoks were around a fire in the Jindas' camp, very grateful to them. Bondo, as usual, went on making jokes.

"Well, well! It seems to me that Ewoks are unlucky. Another performance for which we earned nothing....!"

"The ones who are unlucky are the Duloks," Wicket told him.

"I am so happy to be with you guys! I thought I'd never be able to go back home!" Latara exclaimed.

"Are you sure you want to come back,

Latara?" Kneesaa asked her.

"Absolutely sure! The Jindas are the best performers on Endor, but I prefer to go on being a simple Ewok. I have no need of fame or applause."

"It's very nice to be famous," said Bondo, "but it's also very hard. One must put in a lot of work."

"Right, I've learned a lesson. But I hope that one day the Jindas might return to our village."

"It's possible, although with the Jindas one never knows. Not even the Jindas

know what the Jindas will do! Ha, ha, ha!" Bondo said.

The five Ewoks said their goodbyes to Bondo and their new friends, the Jindas, and they began walking toward the village, which resides upon the crown of the great trees.

And there they remain, happy and full of mirth at being Ewoks—gathering for the night around the fire to listen to the ancient legends recounted to them by Chief Chirpa or the medicine man Logray; coming down from the trees to go fishing or else to pick wild berries....

The Starhoppers Of Aduba 3

Dear Arhul,

You've never known me to miss a deadline or hand in work that I'm not proud of, but I'm afraid this Aduba-3 assignment has me at my wit's end. My patience has grown quantum-thin. Never have I come across so many conflicting stories as to what occurred on this Core-forsaken world two years ago. A scant two years! I've had better luck piecing together tales decades old.

The whole mess began in trying to trace Captain Solo's steps after his departure from Yavin 4 for Tatooine. While I was able to confirm his encounter with Crimson Jack's pirate forces, the story thereafter grows increasingly sketchy. I have tried to get clearance to access the *Falcon's* logs, but since it's a private ship and not part of the Alliance Fleet proper, I've had no luck. Also, you know how difficult it is to sit Captain Solo down for an interview.

Evidence shows that Solo went to Aduba-3 to lay low for a while. Trying to get a straight story as to what happened there is harder than pulling the horns off a bantha. TriNebula Entertainment

certainly hasn't helped, since that gaudy enterprise has gone and made yet another unauthorized holo-doc on Solo, dramatizing (or shall I say, exploiting) the events on Aduba-3. This marks the third bogus documentary done on Solo by that company. As a journalist, I know the sanctity of freedom of speech, but I wouldn't mind seeing theirs revoked.

Unfortunately, that fanciful tale is all I have to work with, and it really has colored people's perceptions of the truth. My deadline has come and gone, and I'm nowhere nearer uncovering what really happened on Aduba-3. I would request an extension, but I know the budgetary constraints the Alliance archivists are under.

I'm uploading my partial reports to Mistress Mnemos now with the understanding that they are at best incomplete and at worst, the biggest poodoo this side of the Rishi Rift. Many apologies.

Yours,

Voren Na'al

Assistant Historian of the Rebel Alliance

Researcher's Notes

Much of the information I gathered for Aduba-3 comes from first-hand observation, as well as downloading its official planetary record from the government registry. By actually making contact with and interviewing Pera [and making a sizable donation to the Sacred Way; see attached receipt], I was able to verify that Solo and Chewbacca were indeed in Tun Aduban. Also, while in Locru's Saloon, I briefly interviewed a Wroonian named Azoora, who gave me some insight into the local swoop gang. I had to cut the interview short though when Azoora's boyfriend threatened me with an unwelcome tracheotomy. According to graffiti in the men's 'fresher stall, that "blue lady is trouble." Hardly a worthwhile source, I know, but on this assignment, I took what I could get.

Researcher's Notes

This is where my story falls apart, Arhul. Although I was able to confirm the existence of all the so-called 'Star-Hoppers,' I have not been able to track any of them down for an interview. Talking to the locals provided no help whatsoever. The population of Aduba-3 is so transient that finding someone who was around two years ago to witness these events is impossible. Even those with second-hand stories could not produce tales that didn't conflict, thanks to the fanciful opus distributed by Tri-Neb. I even found one spacer who was adamant that Jaxxon was a Gungan.

Given that the two surviving Hoppers have made several sector-wide "Most Wanted" lists, I can understand that piecing together information on them would be difficult, but the amount of disinformation out there is quite staggering and perplexing.

Researcher's Notes

On my last day on Aduba-3, Jimm was my only hope at piecing together the events that transpired there two years ago. Unfortunately, he was unwilling to talk to me, since he apparently had just faced a death threat from Valance the bounty hunter, of all beings. I was able to briefly speak with his wife Merri. Though definitely a sweet, beautiful girl, I'm afraid she is not the greatest mind in her village. I'm hardly one to look down upon the provincial, but she struck me as a very credulous person, and her take on the events of two years ago so closely matched the TriNeb holo-doc, I can't help but think it has tainted her memory. She even went on to describe the same unlikely hulking reptilian beast shown at the caper's end, the bizarre lizard that fired lasers from its forehead! It was then that I had to cut my interview short, since my transport was leaving in a few hours. I hate to say it, Arhul, but I don't think we'll ever find out exactly what happened on Aduba-3.



A LONG TIME AGO,
IN A GALAXY FAR,
FAR AWAY ...

THERE WERE
FOUR HEROES.

THE
YOUNG
KNIGHT.

THE
BRAVE
WARRIOR.

HIS FAITHFUL
COMPANION.

A SOVEREIGN
LEADER.

THEY HAD DEALT
A CRUSHING BLOW
TO THE **EMPIRE**
THAT WAS STIFLING
THEIR GROWING
REBELLION.

TOGETHER WITH
THEIR SMALL ARMY,
THEY DISPATCHED
THEIR DARK ENEMY'S
GREATEST
WEAPON.

THEY SUCCEEDED
WHEN ALL HOPE
WAS LOST.

THEY FOUND
STRENGTH
IN THEIR
RESOLVE.

THE **POWER**
OF THEIR
WILL.

BUT **TWO** OF
OUR HEROES
MAY HAVE
DISCOVERED
SOMETHING
ELSE.

AMIDST ALL THIS
STRIFE, THROUGH
THE BATTLE THAT
THEY FOUGHT--THEY
MAY HAVE STUMBLED
UPON THE **MOST**
CHERISHED OF HUMAN
EMOTIONS.

PERHAPS, DESPITE THE
WAR THAT WAGES
AROUND THEM ...

...THIS PAIR MAY
HAVE FOUND THE
BEGINNINGS OF
LOVE.

OR PERHAPS
NOT.

I DIDN'T
SAY YOU WERE
INCOMPETENT, I
SAID YOU WERE
AN **IDIOT**.

ONLY AN **IDIOT**
COULDN'T TELL THE
DIFFERENCE!

OH, WELL,
THAT MAKES **ALL**
THE **DIFFERENCE** IN
THE **WORLD**, **YOUR**
EMINENCE!

IF I HAD REALIZED
THAT **YOUR WORSHIPFULNESS**
WAS **DOLING OUT** THE
COMPLIMENTS, I WOULD
HAVE **DRESSED** FOR IT!

PUT ON
A **CLEAN**
SHIRT!

GOT SOME
PADS FOR
ALL THE
KNEELING!

I HAVE
NEVER MET ANYONE
MORE **ARROGANT**, MORE
CONCEITED, MORE
OVERBEARING--

YEAH, YEAH, YEAH--
YOU OUGHTTA GET **OUT**
MORE! YOU'LL MEET A **LOT** OF
MEN WHO **AREN'T** **SNIVELING**
RICH BOYS!

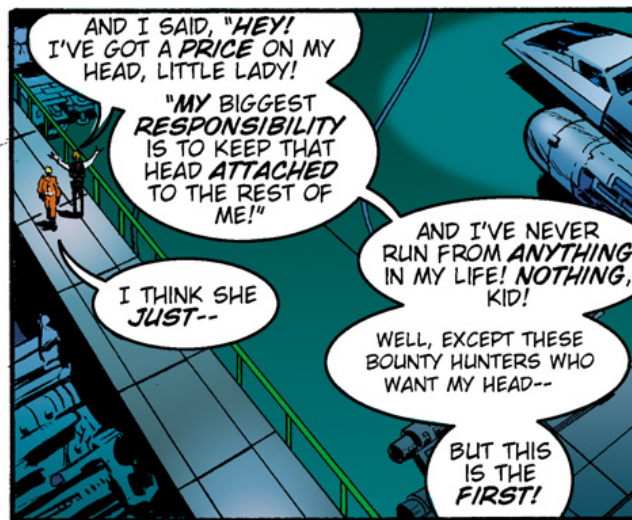
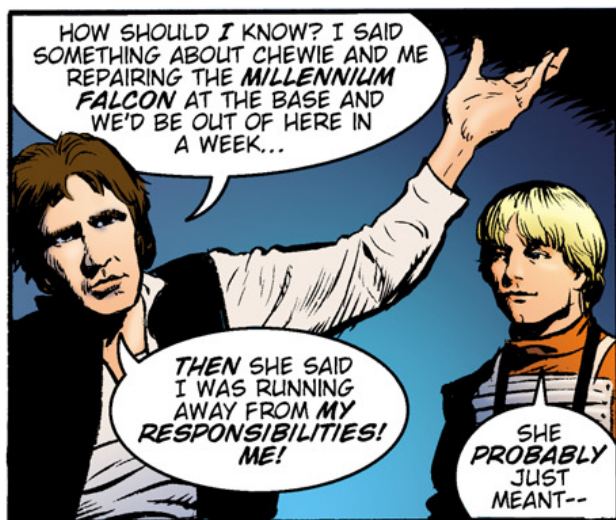
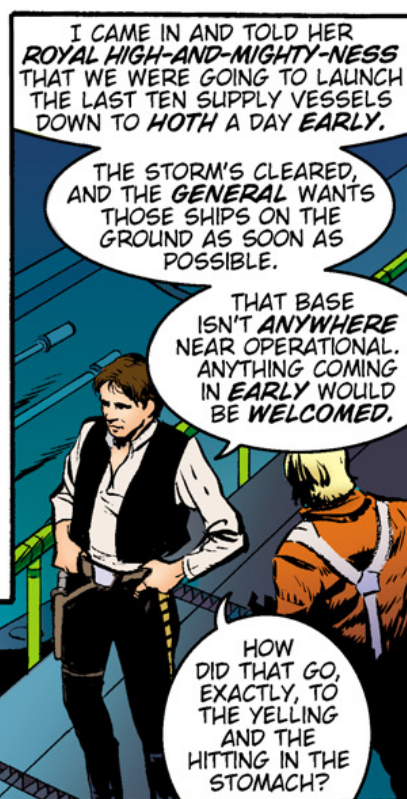
WHAT?!

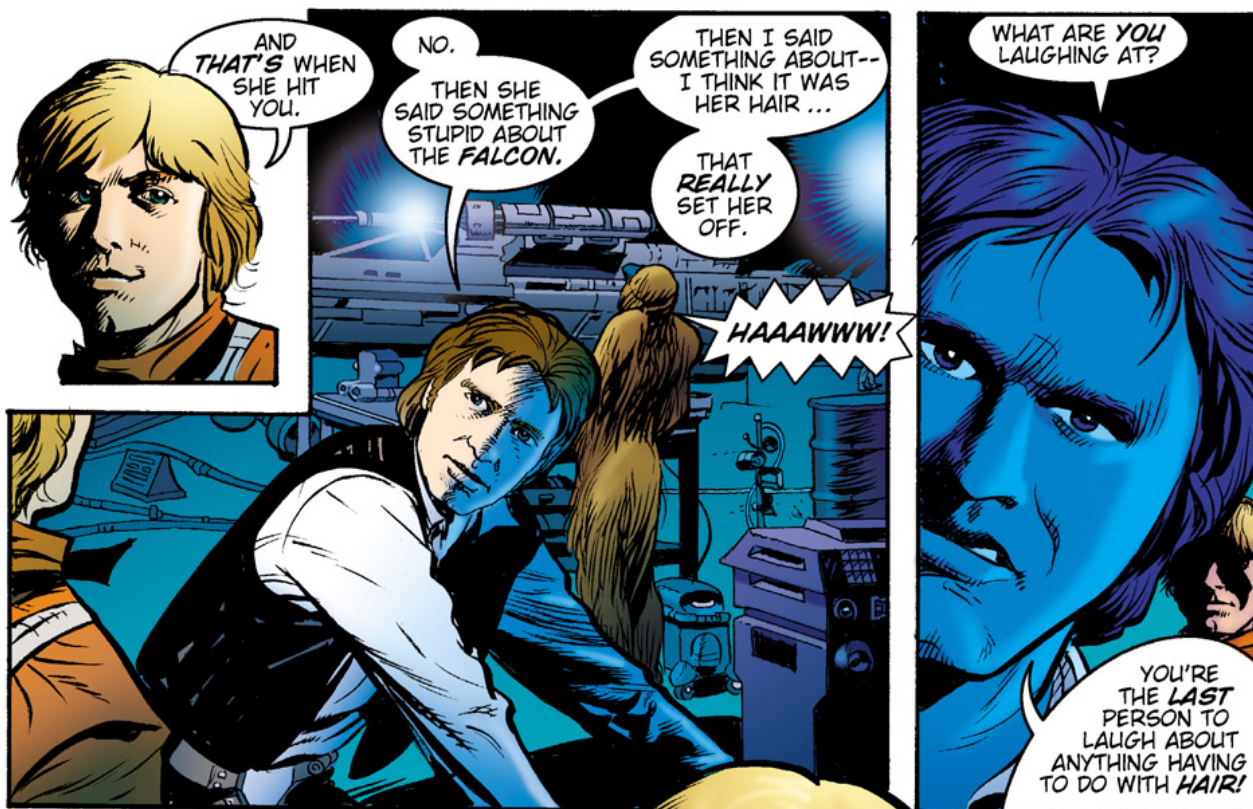
YOU HEARD
ME! ALL OF THOSE
SOFT, **POLITICAL**
DANDIES OR THOSE
HAND SERVANT
FLACKS THAT YOU'VE
ORDERED AROUND
YOUR **WHOLE** LIFE!

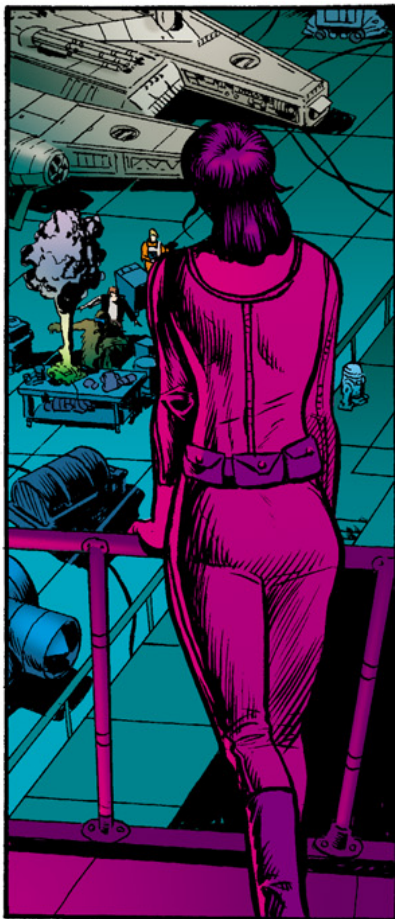
TRY IT IN THE
REAL WORLD
SOMETIME, **YOUR**
HIGHNESS, WHERE
YOU MAY HAVE
TO GET
DIRTY!

*Breaking
the Ice*









NO, SIR,
IT'S COMPLETELY
OFFLINE.

WE WON'T BE
ABLE TO GET
THESE OUT UNTIL
TOMORROW.

WE WERE
PLANNING ON RIDING
ALONG IN **ONE** OF THESE
CARRIERS.

WE SHOULD
REALLY GET DOWN
ON THE SURFACE BY
TONIGHT.

SINCE THE **FALCON'S** OUT
OF COMMISSION UNTIL REPAIRS
ARE DONE, WHAT SHIP **CAN**
I FLY OUT OF HERE IN?



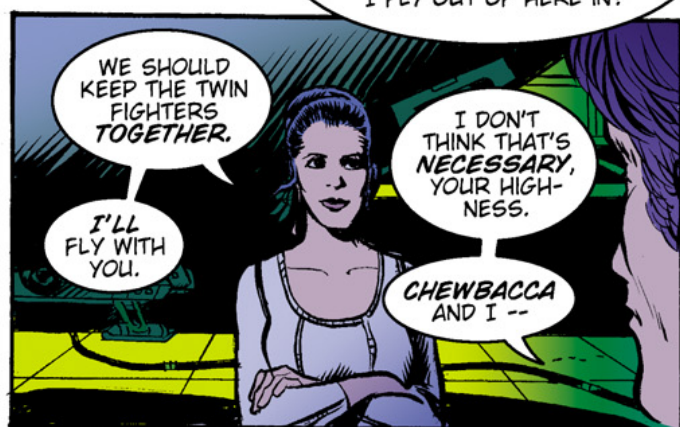
WELL, WE **DO** NEED TWO TWIN
M-CLASS FIGHTERS DOWN THERE.

BUT ONE OF THEM HAS
A BUSTED **NAVICOM**, AND
THE **HYDROBOOSTERS** AREN'T
ON AUTO. IT NEEDS A
CO-PILOT.

I'D SEND ONE
OF THE FLIGHT CREW,
BUT WE CAN'T SPARE
THE PILOTS, SIR.

THAT'S
FINE. **CHEWIE**
AND I WILL
TAKE JUST
THE **ONE.**

NO. IT'S A
WASTE TO SEND
JUST THE SINGLE
SHIP.



WE SHOULD
KEEP THE TWIN
FIGHTERS
TOGETHER.

I'LL
FLY WITH
YOU.

I DON'T
THINK THAT'S
NECESSARY,
YOUR HIGH-
NESS.

CHEWBACCA
AND I --



YOU'RE
NOT THE
ONLY ONES
WHO NEED
TO BE DOWN
ON THE
SURFACE,
CAPTAIN.

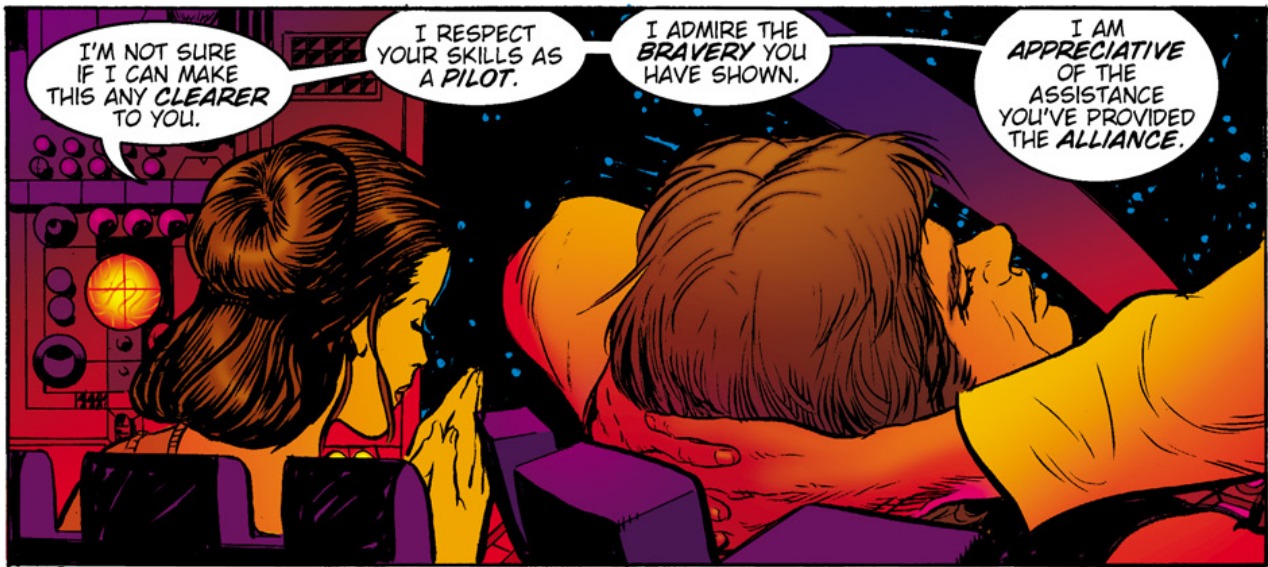
AND I WASN'T
ASKING.



I'LL SEE
YOU IN
LAUNCH BAY
81 IN TEN
MINUTES.







I'M NOT SURE
IF I CAN MAKE
THIS ANY **CLEARER**
TO YOU.

I RESPECT
YOUR SKILLS AS
A **PILOT**.

I ADMIRE THE
BRAVERY YOU
HAVE SHOWN.

I AM
APPRECIATIVE
OF THE
ASSISTANCE
YOU'VE PROVIDED
THE **ALLIANCE**.

I WILL BE THE **FIRST**
TO ADMIT THAT YOU
HAVE BEEN ALMOST
INDISPENSABLE.

THANK
YOU.

I AM
NOT
INTERESTED
IN YOU.

YOU ARE A
MERCENARY.

YOU'VE FALLEN
IN WITH THE
REBELLION AND
RISEN TO THE
OCCASION, BUT IT
DOESN'T CHANGE
WHO OR WHAT
YOU **ARE**.

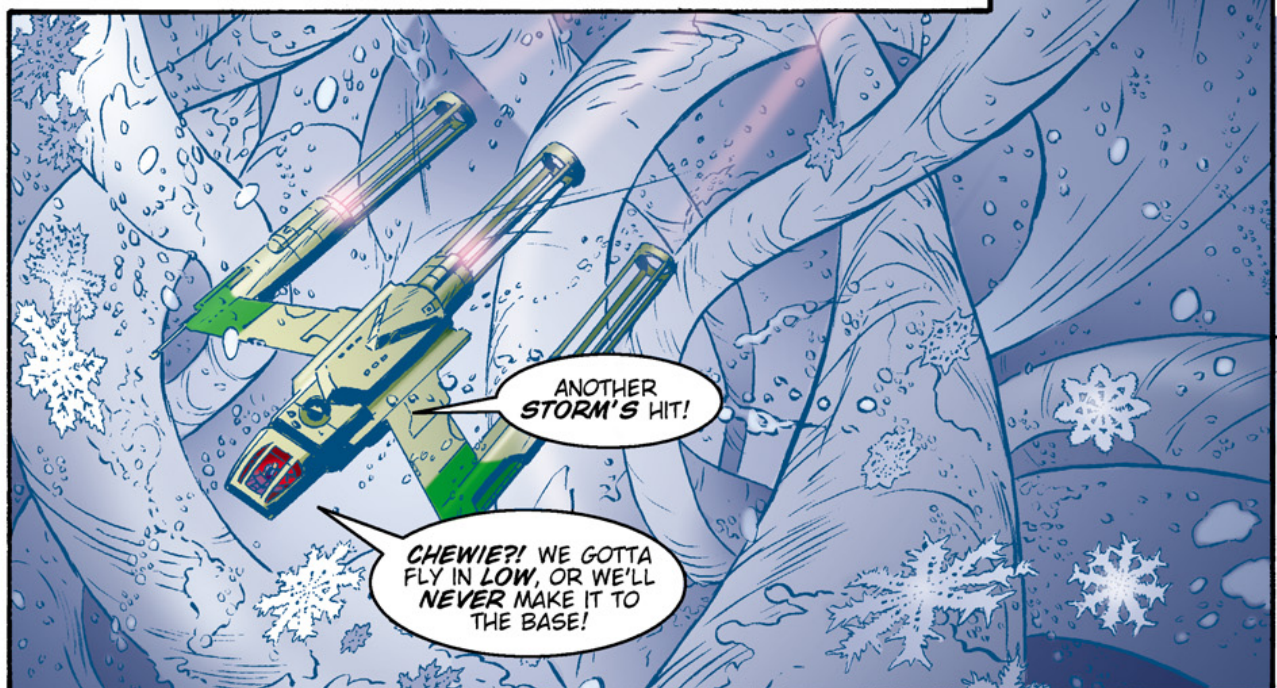
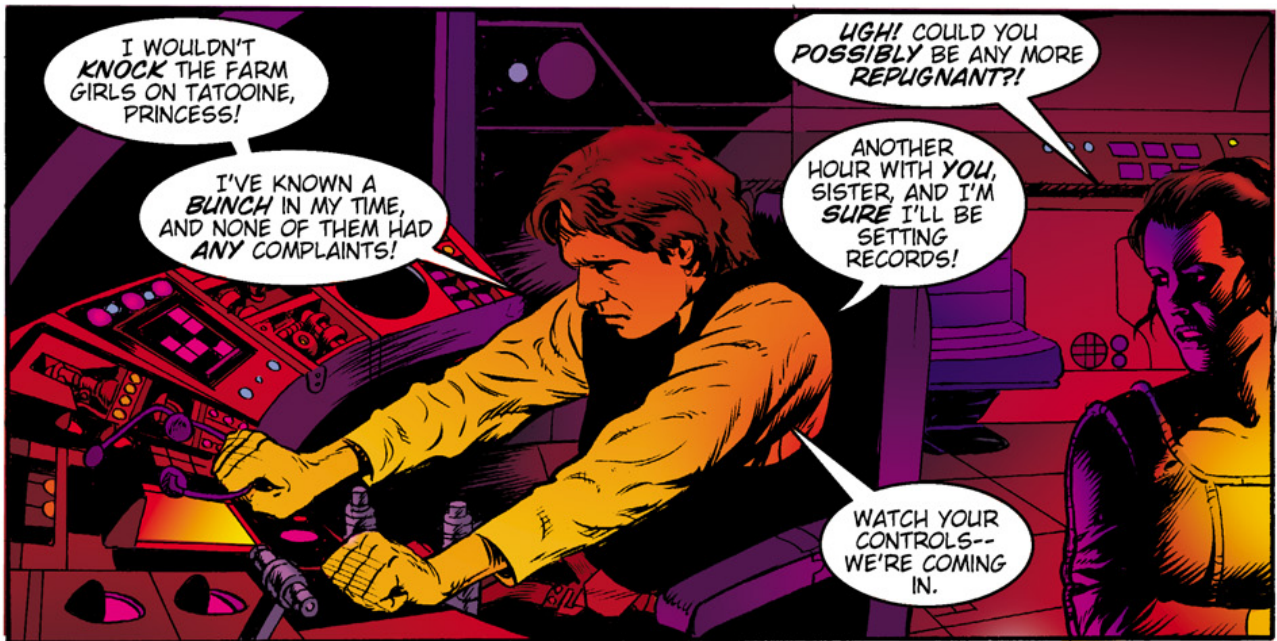


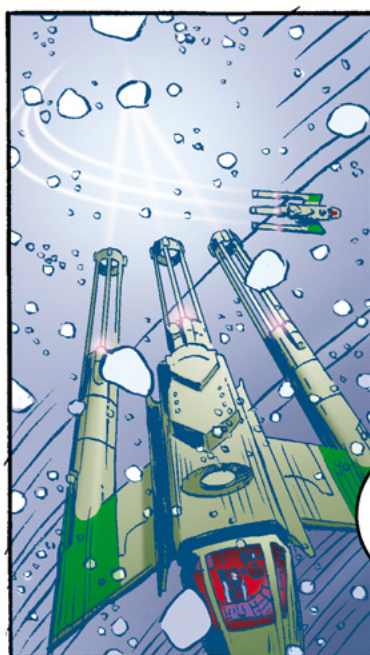
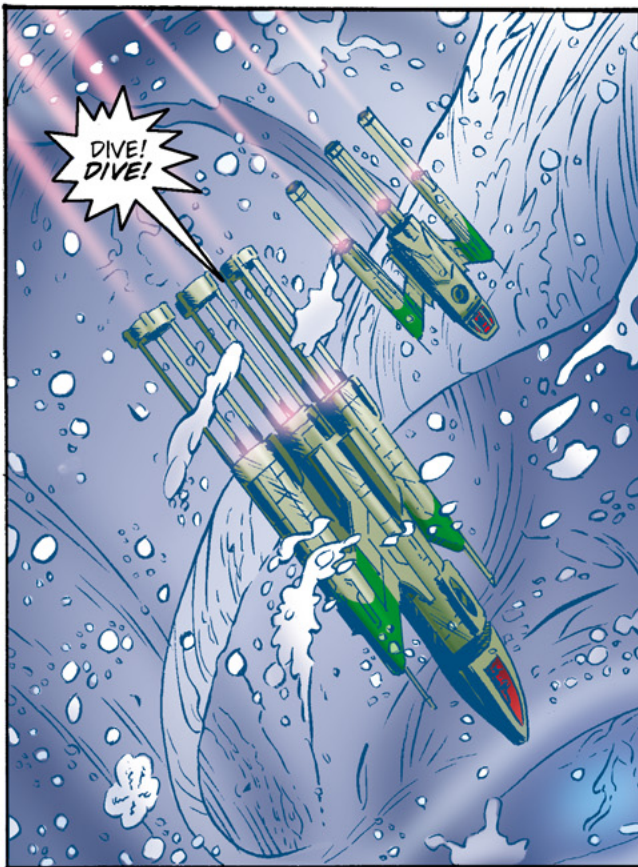
SO... I'M
BENEATH
YOU?

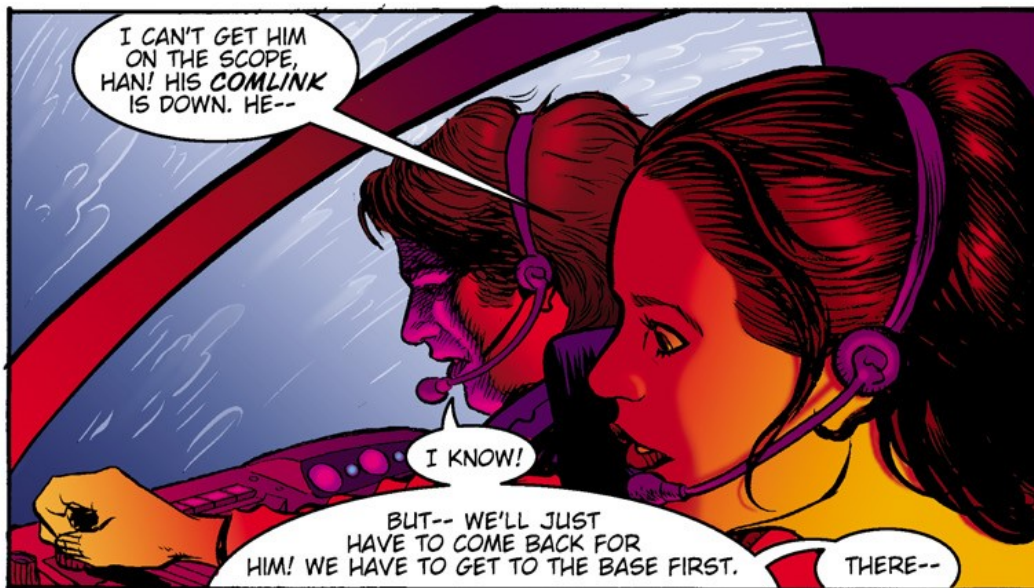
IS **THAT**
WHAT YOU'RE
GETTING
AT?

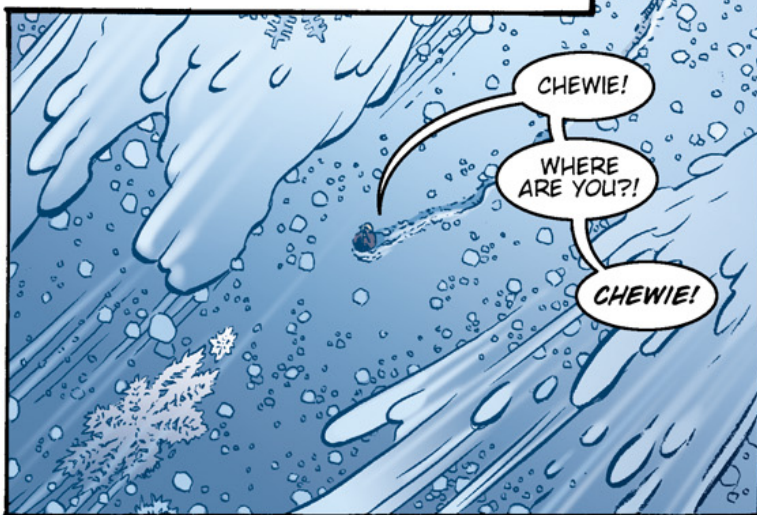
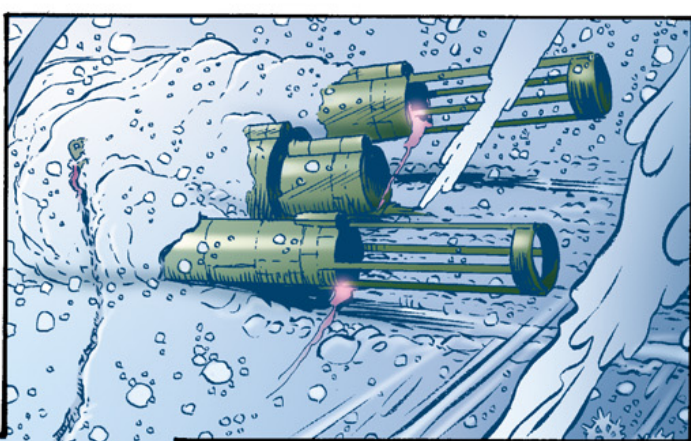
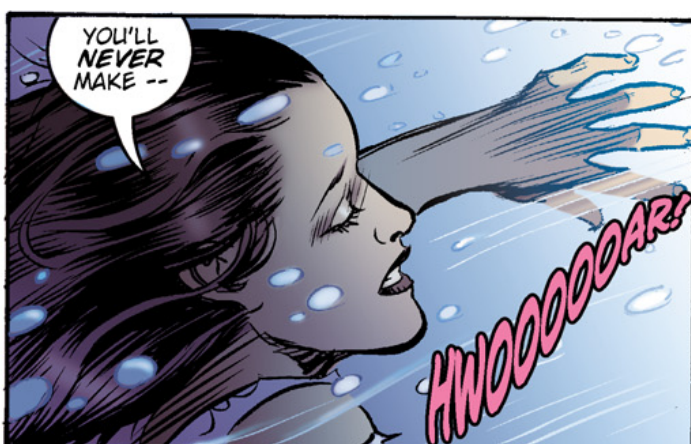
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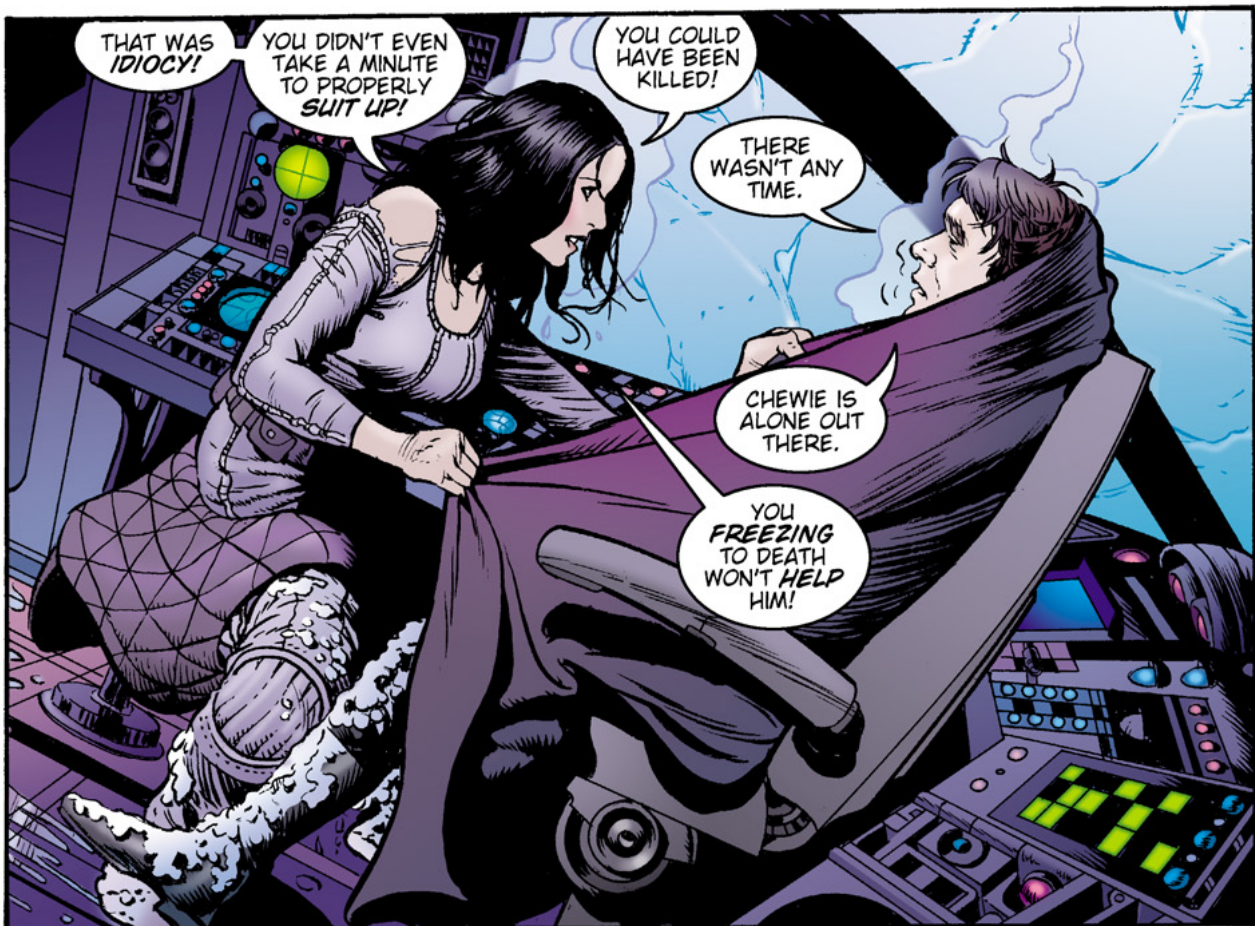
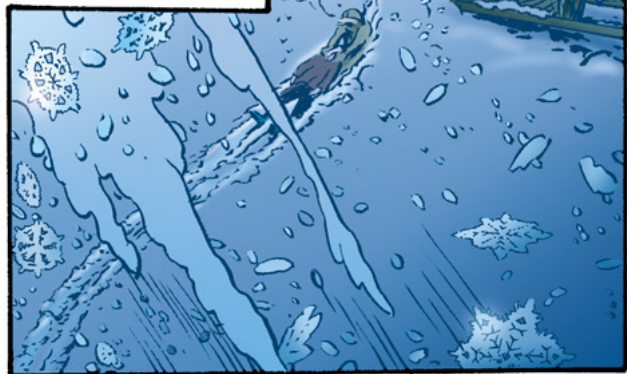
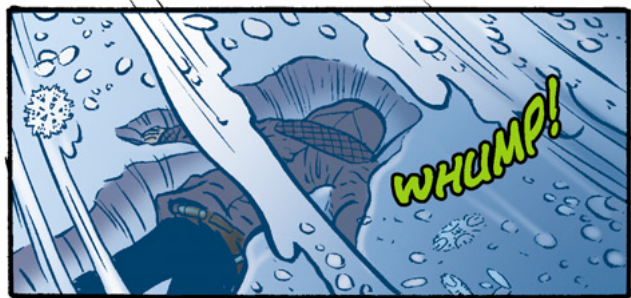
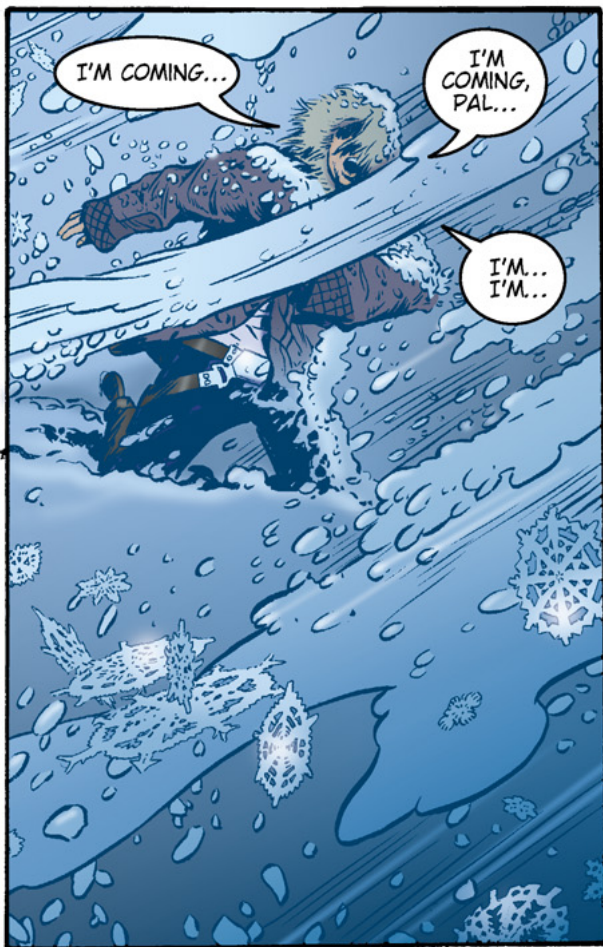
I COULD BE
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ON **TATOOINE**
AND IT
WOULDN'T
CHANGE HOW
I FEEL.



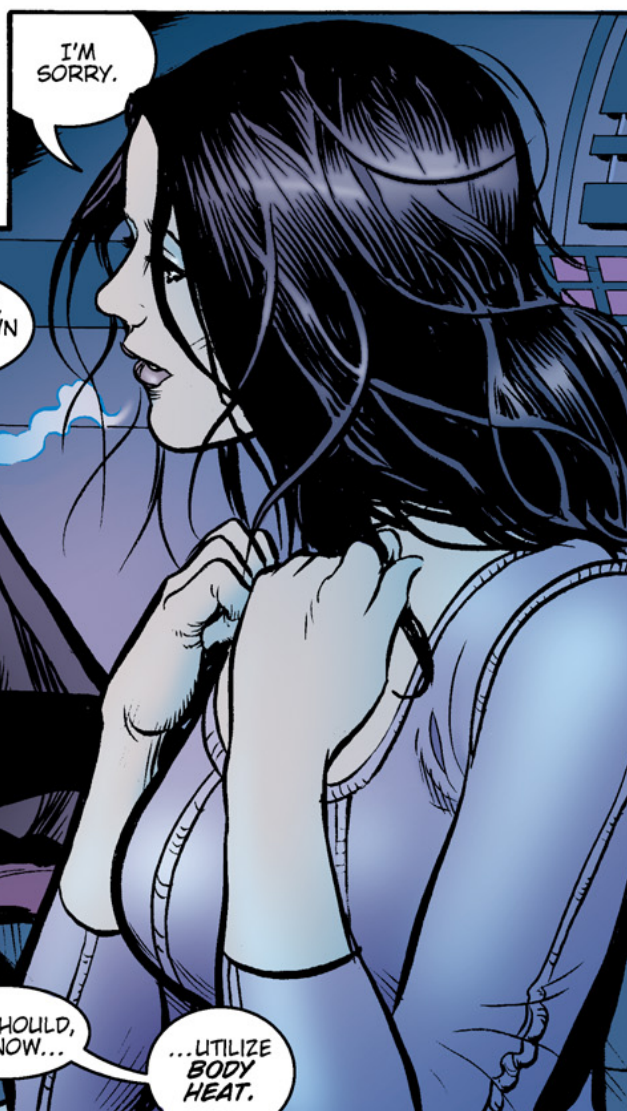
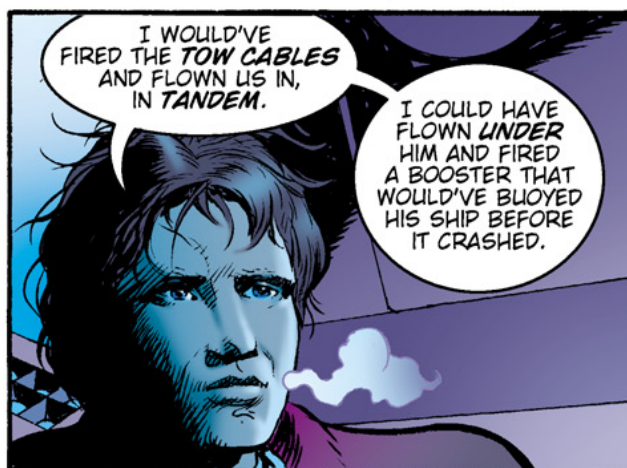


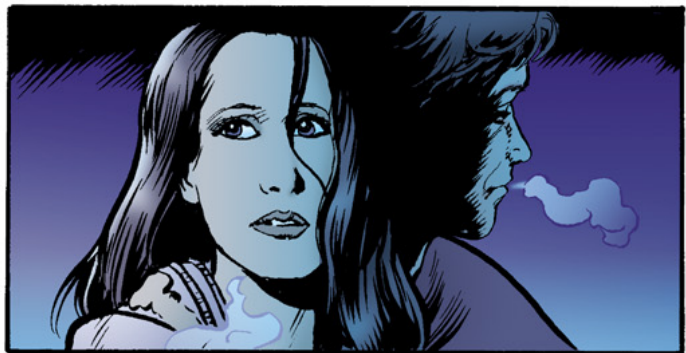
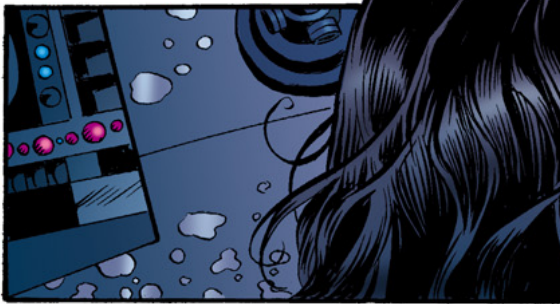


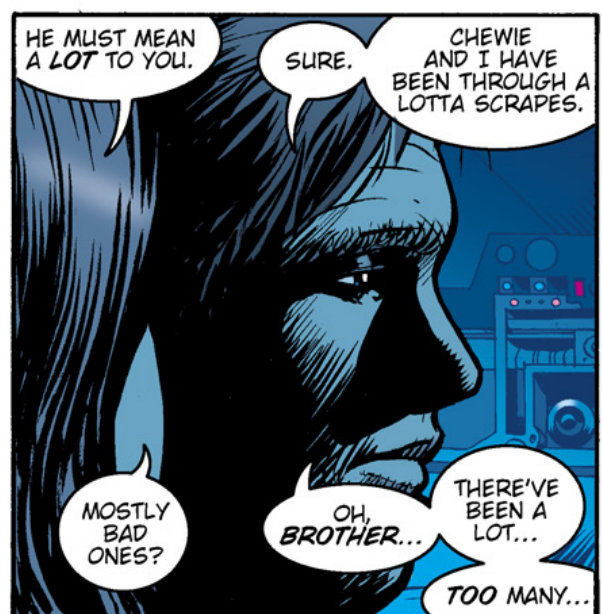


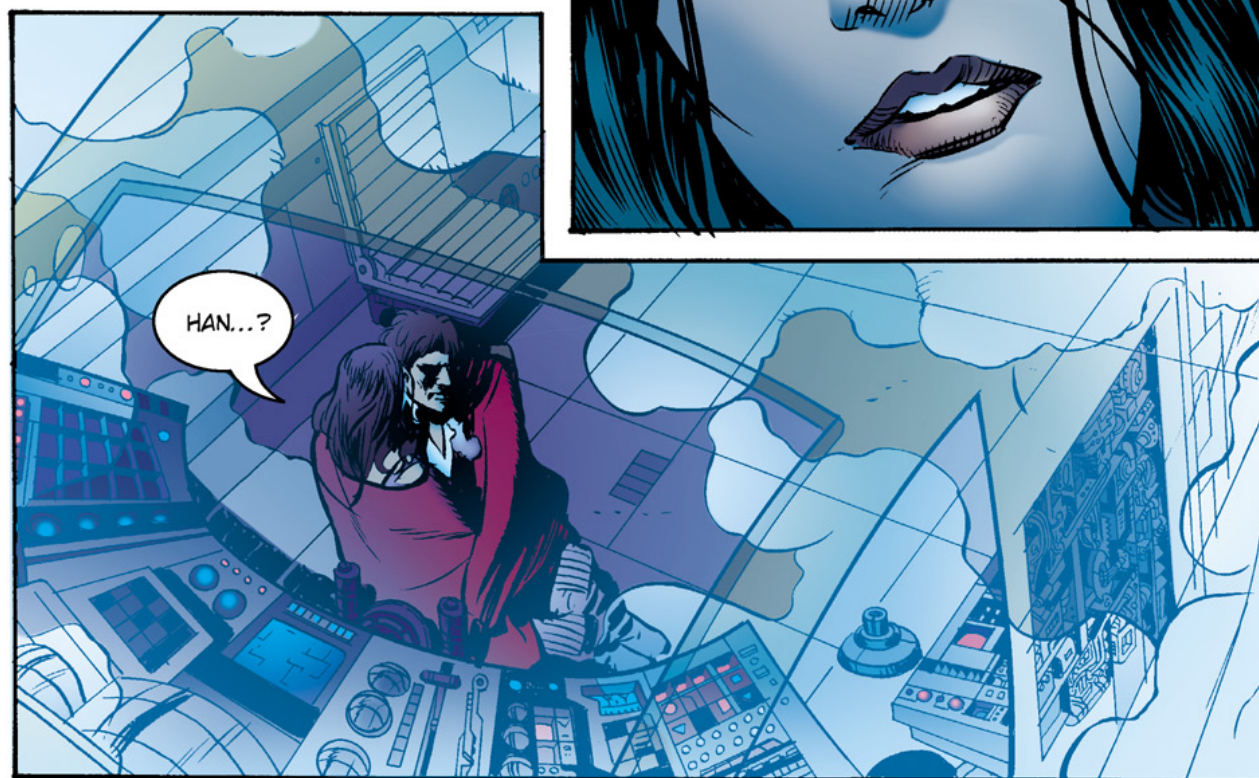
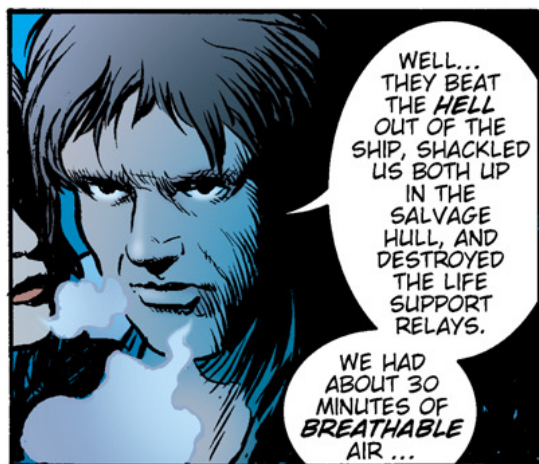
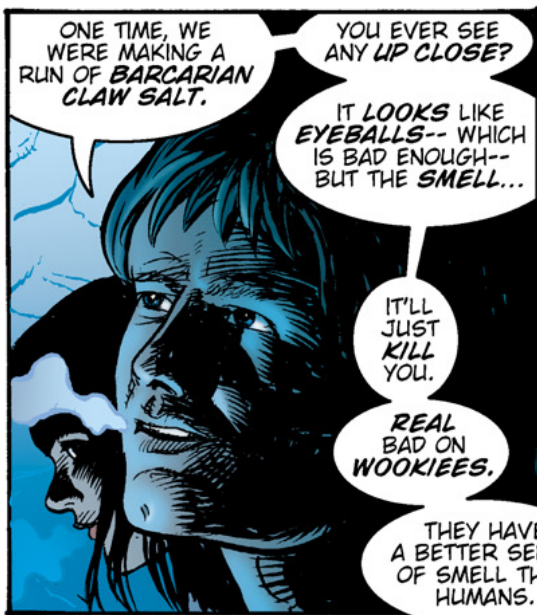


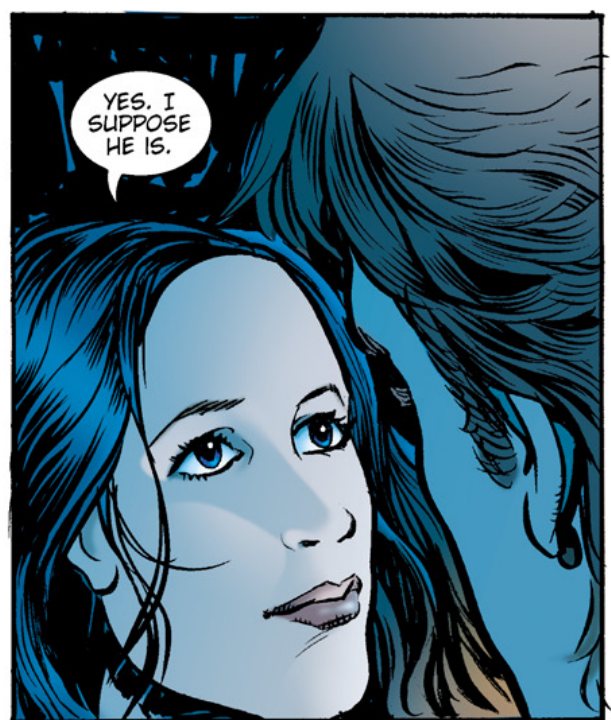
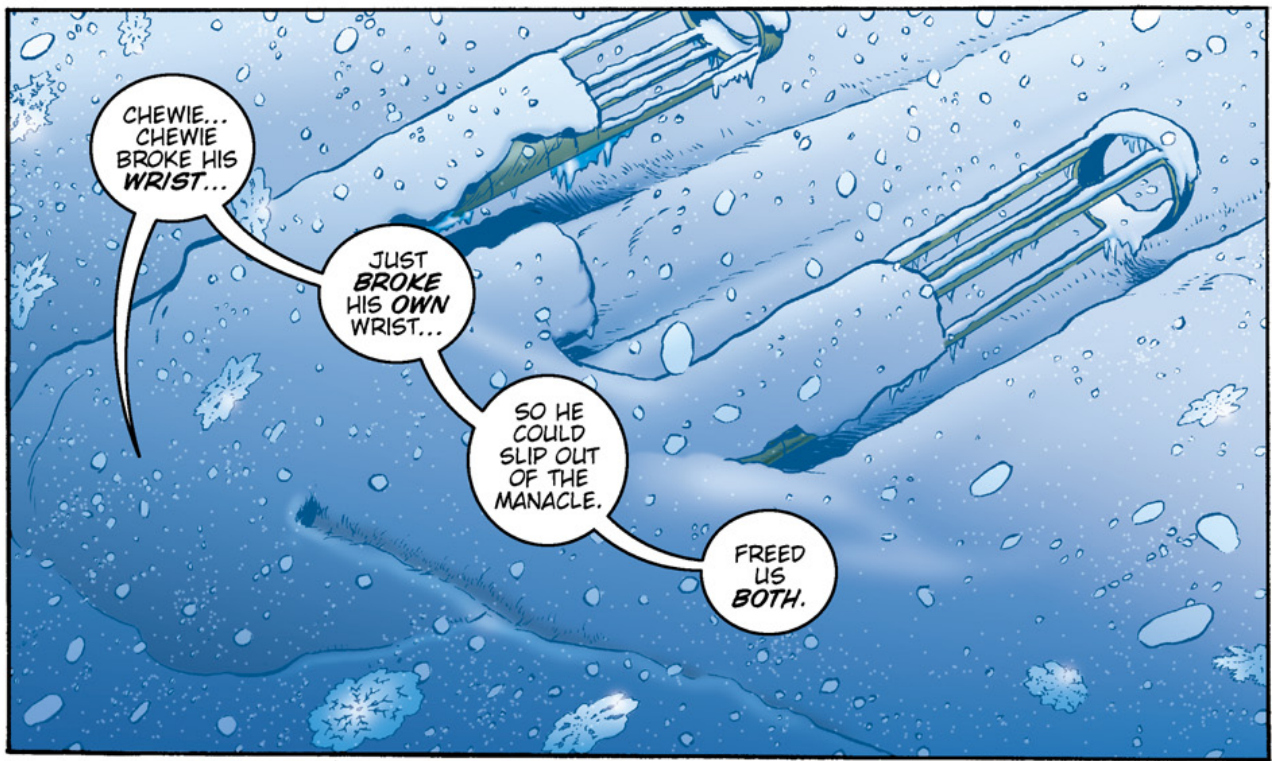


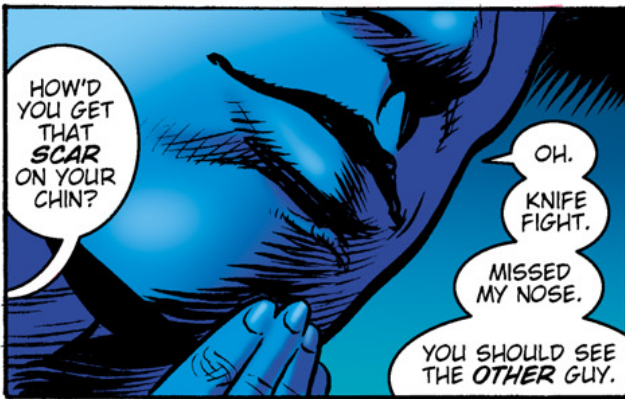




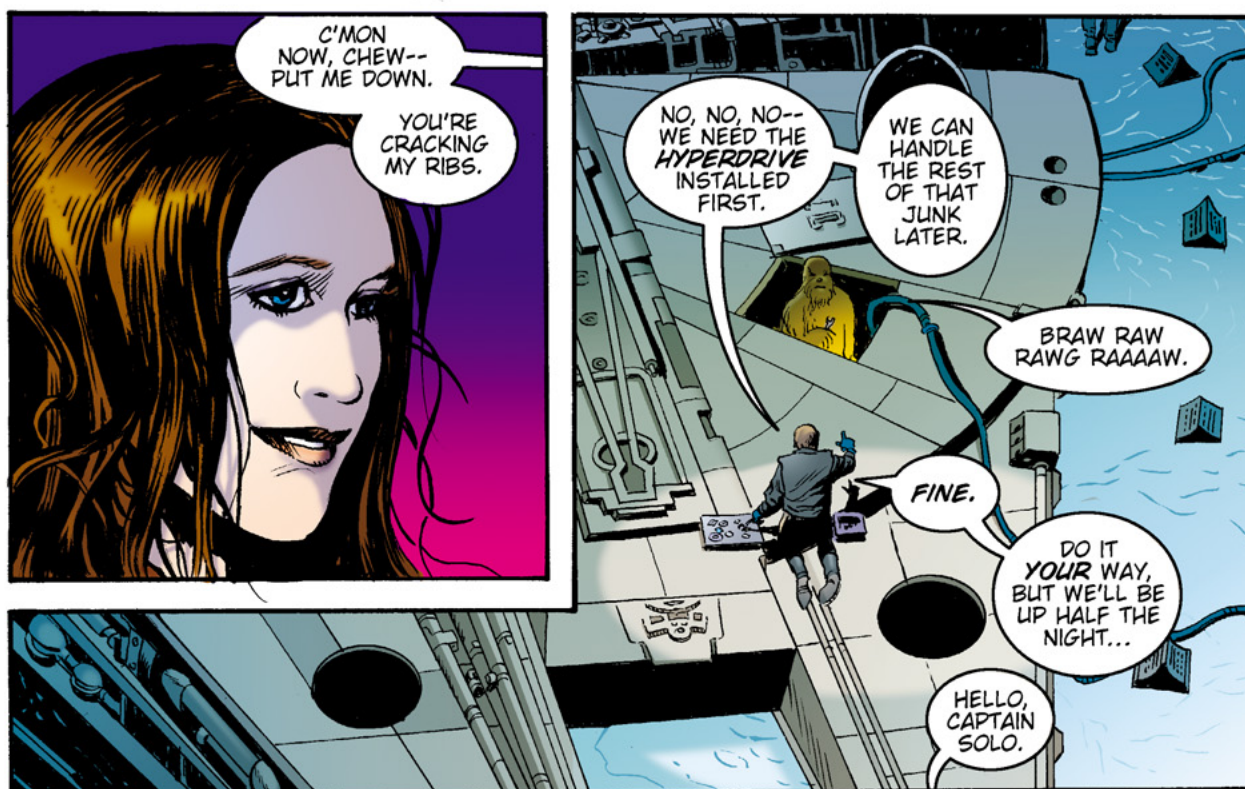
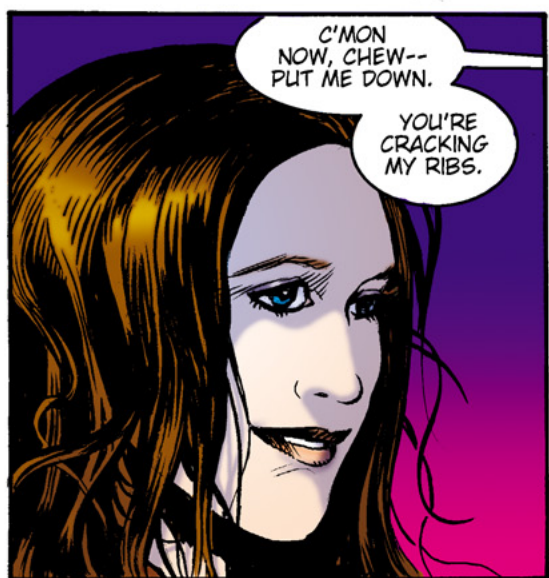


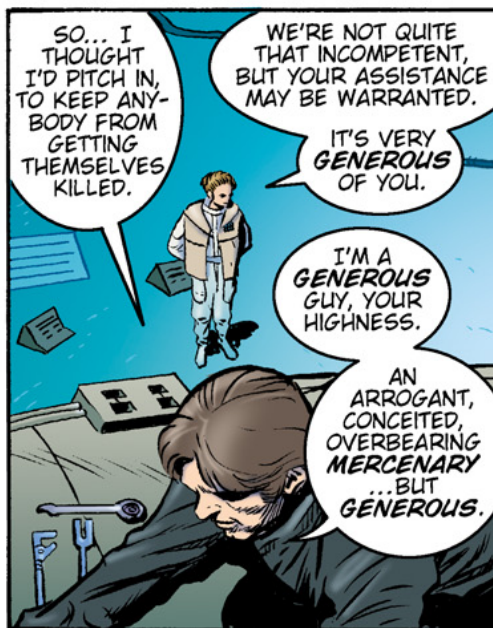
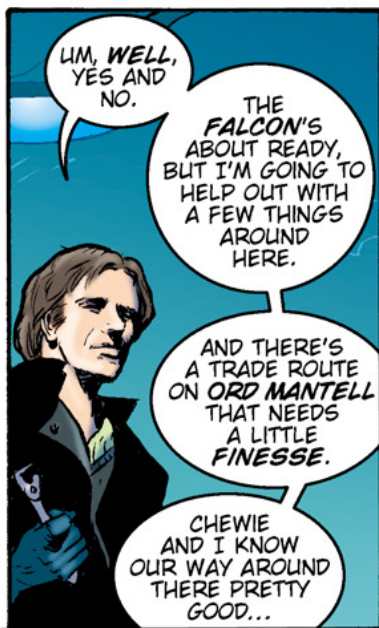


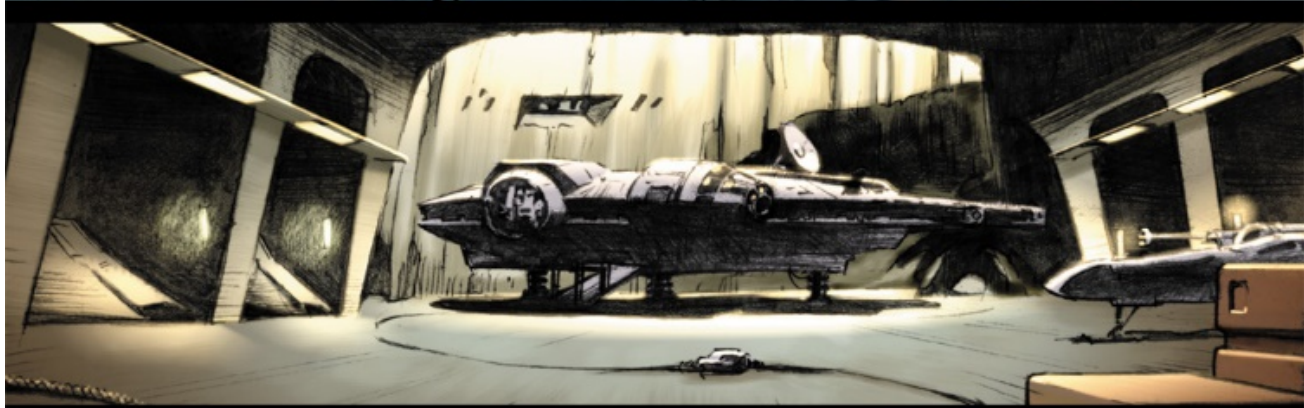


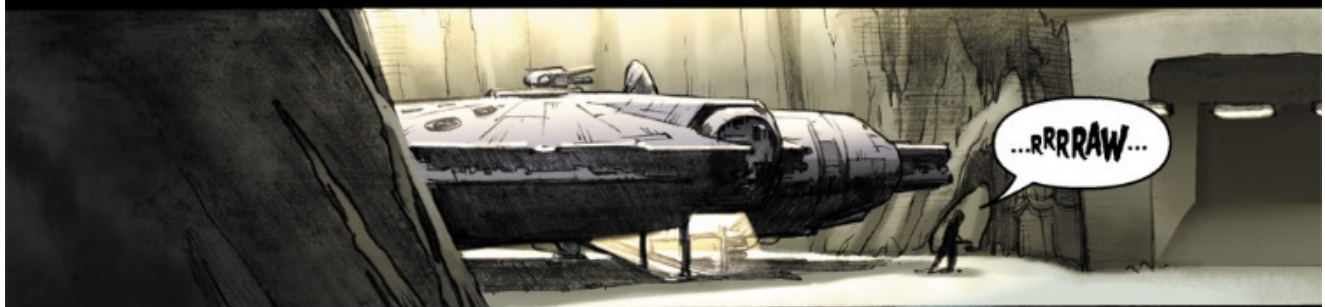








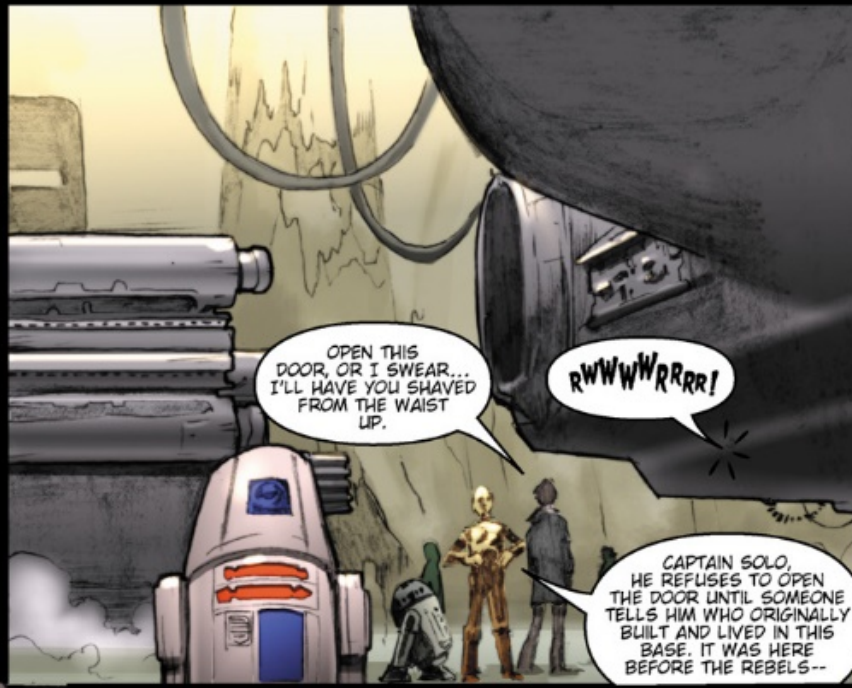








CHEWIE!



OPEN THIS DOOR, OR I SWEAR... I'LL HAVE YOU SHAVED FROM THE WAIST UP.

RWWWRRR!

CAPTAIN SOLO, HE REFUSES TO OPEN THE DOOR UNTIL SOMEONE TELLS HIM WHO ORIGINALLY BUILT AND LIVED IN THIS BASE. IT WAS HERE BEFORE THE REBELS--



I KNOW! I CAN SPEAK WOOKIEE.



YOU! WHO WAS HERE BEFORE THE REBELS ARRIVED?

AHHHHH....

UH, NO ONE KNOWS. WE THINK THERE WERE SETTLERS YEARS AGO BUT THEY JUST DISAPPEARED. THE WEATHER MUST'VE DRIVEN THEM AWAY.



THERE. HAPPY NOW? OPEN THE DOOR.

RRRRAAWW...



FINE, FINE! STAY IN THERE ALL DAY. SEE IF I CARE.

RAWWWARRR...

AND THE SAME TO YOU.

RAWHOOPI!

LAYING AROUND? HOW DARE YOU!









Fanatics Prepare Pinacist Exodus

CMAOLI DI, MALLONORE: Radical Pinacists are preparing an exodus from their homes in Brema sector. These groups represent the most fanatic elements of the Pinacism movement who believe those who sit out the major galactic events will be left to pick up the pieces.

The fanatical leader of these Pinacists, Von Doobba, is a representative to Cmaoli Di's planetary council who has

strongly encouraged his colleagues to withdraw from the Empire. After last week's decision against such action, Doobba resigned from the council and began preparations to leave the system with his most devoted followers. The group has been readying transports and freighters near Doobba's home city of Ferronel. These Pinacists have refused to speak with newsnet reporters, and in some cases have driven them and others away with threats of violence. Their departure date and intended destination have not been revealed.

It is not yet known whether Moff Malcom will step in to prevent the mass departure. His statement several months ago asking communities to discourage the Pinacism movement seemed to have little effect. Observers feel the Moff will not position Imperial forces against the Pinacists unless the situation becomes more volatile.

This incident is an almost repeat performance of the emigration from systems surrounding Salliche in the Core Worlds 250 years ago. An idealist named Adarian Tropis encouraged those disaffected by the corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy to leave for the Outer Rim Territories, where they intended to establish self-sufficient enclaves where each member was directly represented in government. Many of these refugees founded uncharted colonies which even today remain lost.

While the most radical of the Pinacists are leaving Brema sector, they represent only a handful of those who believe in Pinacism. Those left behind have already expressed a more firm commitment to insulating their own communities from the activities, support and rule of the Imperial government.

Empire Destroys Syvris Shadowport

NAR SHADDAA NODE: In a surprise attack, elements of the Imperial fleet destroyed the shadowport on the crater moon of Syvris. The smuggler enclave was bombarded by Star Destroyer turbolaser batteries, then gutted by AT-ST walker units and Imperial ground troops.

While the Imperial Navy has not offered any explanation, the few survivors provided some details. Days before the attack, shadowport control tracked an escape pod which landed on the moon's far side. When a patrol found the craft, it was empty. Some believe the pod carried an Imperial spy who scouted the moon and somehow reported the shadowbase's location back to the fleet.

Some survivors—who shall remain anonymous—suspect the shadowport was betrayed by the Mon Calamari smuggler Basz Maliyu, who conveniently raised ship from the port hours before the Imperial Star Destroyers arrived. Although Maliyu had mostly run cargoes for crime syndicates, some believe he was really working for the Empire.

Most spacers at the shadowport had enough time to blast off and evade the Imperial assault. The initial turbolaser bombardment leveled the base, and only a few TIE fighter picket patrols were stationed to take parting shots at fleeing smugglers. Unfortunately, Rance, the retired pirate who ran the shadowport, remained behind to die with his station.

The Empire's motivation behind this attack is not clear. Although the fleet is charged with customs duties in regions where Imperial Customs cannot maintain authority, it has rarely made a priority of hunting down and obliterating smuggler shadowports—especially those as small as Rance's operation. Analysts believe it might be a token show of power to curtail smuggler shipments to and from hidden elements of the Rebellion. Some think the shadowport was mistaken for a Rebel Alliance installation. Rumors abound that these Star Destroyers were part of the Imperial Death Squadron, Admiral Ozzel's task force charged with rooting out and destroying any Rebel presence in the Outer Rim Territories. If this is true, it may well explain the more aggressive policy the fleet is taking against anyone who may in some way resemble or aid the Rebellion.

The *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok* supports the Independent Traders' Infonet's advisory to smugglers and free-traders in the remote areas of the Outer Rim Territories. The action against the Syvris shadowport is a clear indication of the Empire's aggressive presence in this region. Our next report will analyze whether this increased military force will adversely affect shipping in the region.

Empire Called in to Stop Hreas Riots

LENTHALIS, HREAS PORT CITY: Martial law was imposed throughout Spirva sector this week in response to uncontrolled rioting and skirmishes with Imperial troops and starport security on Lenthalis. Moff Shinda made the announcement hours after Hreas Port City was consumed by a gang war between rival underworld factions.

Several masses of rioters converged on Hreas Port City's Commerce Concourse. Each faction's forces consisted of swoop gangs, local youth mobs and the enforcement arms of several local crime lords. All were armed with a variety

of modified combat equipment. Many items were from Galladinium's Datalog, which had been banned by Moff Shinda four months ago. Among the most noticeable equipment in the skirmish were five suits of AV-1A assault armor and a squadron of gladiator walkers with the light laser cannon and shielding replaced with dual medium repeating blasters. Other participants used a variety of sidearms and explosives to wreak havoc on the Commerce Concourse.

Although rioters did not attack the Imperial garrison outside Hreas Port City, smaller installations throughout the area were overrun by zealous gang members desperate for weapons and other supplies to aid their escalating conflicts. Imperial biker troops and airspeeders called in to quell the commotion were snared by repulsorlift grappling gun lines and automated picket blasters set just for such a purpose. By the time Imperial AT-ST walkers and heavier support craft moved in, the rioters had dispersed, taking their heavy combat gear with them.

Violent criminal activity has increased throughout Spirva sector despite a ban on importing goods from Galladinium Galactic Exports. Many items in the Galladinium Datalog could easily be modified for combat applications. Moff Shinda blames the recent rioting on an influx of contraband slipped through sector security. "Smugglers make huge profits running these banned items through customs," the Moff said. "What they don't realize is their profitable activities have spawned violent disorder throughout my sector." Shinda warned smugglers against interfering with sector security. "We will no longer tolerate elements of the Fringe disrupting the lives of loyal Imperial citizens in Spirva sector. Rest assured our forces are even now closing the net on those who prosper from the misfortunes of others."

Moff Shinda has returned from his sheltered country estate to personally oversee operations from the Imperial garrison on Lenthalis. He has ordered authorities throughout the sector to crack down on smugglers, and to show no mercy for anyone causing trouble in major population centers. Reports indicate that elements of the sector fleet are returning from various patrols and sorties against suspected Rebel strongholds to blockade Lenthalis. Analysts suspect the rest of the fleet will be deployed to Spirva sector's most vital systems to enforce order and put an end to the gun-running. Local garrison forces have been sent into cities to maintain order, and many expect naval-based Imperial Army units to arrive soon and aid garrison troops.

Moff Shinda has not yet asked for assistance from outside the sector. "At this time there is no need for additional Imperial intervention," the Moff asserted. "Although this initial uprising took us somewhat by surprise, we are now fully prepared to confront any other such disturbances should they arise." Shinda did not speculate when martial law would be lifted. *

No Reports on Imperial Death Squadron

NAR SHADDAA NODE: Despite efforts by free-traders and *Kal'tamok* reporters throughout the Outer Rim Territories, no traces of the Imperial Death Squadron have been

found lately. The fleet's last reported engagement was the unprovoked attack on the Syvris shadowport (see the *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok* report 38:3:31 for more details on that assault). Although the Death Squadron's leaders, Admiral Ozzel and the feared Lord Darth Vader, are charged with rooting out and annihilating Rebel military forces, they have recently detained independent spacers and attacked smuggler bases.

With Ozzel at the helm and Vader leading the hunt, such an unexpected disappearance can only bode ill for the spacer community, especially in light of the sudden and merciless Syvris shadowport assault. The *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok* would like to reaffirm its advisory to smugglers and free-traders in the remote areas of the Outer Rim Territories. Until the Death Squadron's true motives are revealed, anyone traveling the hyperlanes seems subject to Imperial suspicion.

Brentaal Breaks Trade Records

BRENTAAL, CORMOND: The Brentaal League of Guilds declared a Landmark Holiday to celebrate a record week of commodities trading. More stocks and credits changed hands on the Brentaal market than ever before during a five-day period.

Corporations based in the Core Worlds benefitted from the brisk trading, posting record-breaking profits and divi-

dend increases. Among the most successful were HavaKing, Santhe/Sienar Technologies, MerenData, Imperial Mining Corp., and the Tagge Company. Brentaal locals who cashed in on the furious market activity include House Brentioch, the Dajaal Family and Hall Jo'uda. Warehouses and stockyards were cleared out in anticipation of new goods flowing in from every end of the galaxy. Imperial Governor Jerrod Maclain also scored big in the markets, moving some of his slower stocks and acquiring more lucrative interests with valuable potential.

The week-long Landmark Holiday celebration will be marked with parades and parties as Brentaal's noble trading houses commemorate their good fortune. The Brentaal Hall Conservatory plans to present an encore performance of highlights from the Kallea Cycle operatic epic before it embarks on its Core Worlds and Colonies tour next month. Most noble guilds and even the Imperial governor will be throwing lavish receptions. Commerce officers will take this opportunity to make deals among the guilds and prepare strategies for the coming months. New noble house alliances are expected to emerge to accommodate what Brentaal analysts believe to be an unprecedented era of prosperity for the planet and its innumerable commercial interests.

Although the Brentaal commodities exchanges will be closed during the holiday, several expediting houses will continue to make sure market goods flow through the busy commerce world.

We Are Made of Suffering

The following statement was discovered in data-files retrieved from wreckage near Ubertica:

History may question my motives, but their accusations do not concern me. Our people, the True Ubese, have lived in exile long enough, while the *yrak pootzck* have followed the easy life and usurped our rightful place in the galaxy. It is for honor and justice that we fight.

They say we are of the same blood, but we are not. We have endured millennia of suffering while they lived in pampered luxury. We True Ubese have scraped and bludgeoned a harsh existence from the wastelands of our world, battling hostile clans, poisoned earth and savage predators. The pretenders, the *yrak pootzck*, have basked in their fair living, enjoying the verdant fields and hills of Ubertica, and basking in the political stability inflicted upon them by their Republic and Imperial masters. Our people

are considered outcasts, while theirs are accepted as a welcomed race among the galaxy.

So I, Savax Clan-Vorsazg, War-Master of the Southern Wastes, have mustered my clan-brothers to erase the mistake with which history has cursed us. The *yrak pootzck* must be destroyed if we are to relinquish this curse and emerge into the growing galaxy. We have acquired five warships which shall rain destruction on Ubertica — then we will personally land and finish off the survivors one by one to forever erase their memory from this universe. Such is the will of Savax and the destiny of the Ubese people.

Upon hearing of Savax's strike against Ubertica, an Imperial sector fleet was dispatched. Although the fleet destroyed Savax's ships and troops, it was too late to stop the attack, which destroyed many of Ubertica's cities.

Galactic Bagtlegrounds: Battle of Zaloriis

"When a planet falls out of line, it too must be corrected. Sometimes this requires the unrelenting power of the entire Imperial Army. Sometimes it requires more than that. Sometimes it requires a Sith Lord."

—Mara Jade

Transe Decar: *"Zaloriis formally declares its independence."*

Darth Vader: *"Request denied, Minister."*

—Transe Decar, moments before his death

In the time following the Battle of Yavin, the population of Zaloriis was growing more and more tired of the Imperial presence on the planet, including the bizarre experiments with walking machines being conducted by Imperial military. Summoned to a meeting with the Zaloriis Minister Transe Decar, Darth Vader walked into a trap, as the rebellious Minister had his troops capture Vader's men and hold him hostage. With little effort, all Zaloriis militia members present were killed by the Dark Lord. He then proceeded to interrogate one of the soldiers as to the location of the captured Imperials. Upon deducing the location of the detention compound, he and his Stormtrooper squad proceeded to head towards it, and freed the troops.

After regrouping and gathering intelligence on the situation, Vader learned that Colonel Veers had been captured by the local militia and was sentenced to be executed. Ambushing the prison convoy, composed of a column of two mounted troopers and six Zaloriis militiamen, Vader and his troops freed the Colonel, and also recruited several heavy mounted troopers in the process. Upon being informed by Veers about Fondor II being under attack, Vader proceeded towards the city of Fondor II, where they were able to call for reinforcements after wiping out some Rebels.

To gain an advantage in the coming battle, it was decided to liberate the prototype AT-AT walker from the research facility of Camp Culroon. Upon retrieving the walker, *Blizzard 1*, Vader also managed to gain command of by five heavy Dewback troopers, five repeater troopers, two AT-PTs, two AT-STs, two AT-AAs and five workers, as well as stockpiles of food, ore, carbon and nova crystals. Emperor Palpatine then contacted Darth Vader and commanded him to send his forces to subjugate Zaloriis City for its treachery. At the suggestion of Veers, *Blizzard 1* was then moved to Fondor II.

The AT-AT prototype figured prominently in the onslaught, impressing the Imperial commanders and demoralizing the Zaloran rebels. At the height of the battle, Zaloriis City was devastated by Imperial guns, most notably the ones attached to *Blizzard 1*.

After the capital had fallen, Veers searched the city library's archives for any information on the Alliance's hideouts. It was then discovered that the Rebels had fled to a new location, somewhere near Elrood.

Idol Intention

Drake Paulsen leaned against the balcony railing that surrounded the upper level of Feyodor's Tavern and grinned into the swarming crowd below him. As a refreshing wind blew across the rooftop, the young Socorran brushed a stray hair from his handsome face and adjusted the golden hoop in his left ear.

"Nikaede, this was a great idea!" he shouted in a boyish voice. Pulling absently at the restraint over his blaster, he patted the Wookiee on the shoulder and sat back down at their corner table.

The Wookiee carefully settled herself into the modified dining chair, and laid her bowcaster at the foot of the table for easy access. Suffering from a voracious appetite, she howled with great pleasure at the banquet of food before them and commended Feyodor, their cook and host, on his work. From the bar, the rotund human chef bowed dramatically to

the Wookiee's emphatic praises and instructed his serving boys to pay extra-special attention to the private booth in the far corner or face severe consequences. "Hmmm, you said it, partner, " Drake chuckled. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, savoring the delicious aroma until his eyes watered and his lungs could no longer stand the pressure.

There was stuffed Uln bird, glazed with a light mist of Zsajhira berry juice and served with a generous portion of deep-fried Issori blowfish snouts. Sauteed in spices and pepper fettles, Junobian soft-shell sand fliers were served in a diminutive black kettle of Corellian wine, still boiling from the oven fryers, and topped with genuine Corellian seed poppers to bring out the robust flavor.

Draping the napkin over his thigh. Drake shook his head at the exquisite feast, which was rounded out with a basket full of Rishi honeystix, each dipped in sweet powder and fried to a light crisp-ness. The Socorran bit into the end of the tender stick and groaned in ecstasy as the batter melted against his tongue. "Nik, you've got to try one of these honeystix. Fabulous! Feyodor's outdone himself this time. "

Drake stared into the skies. Exploding against the lower atmo-sphere of the planet, compacted phosphorous shells burst open in vibrant shades of green, red, and orange flames. The decorative fireworks were detonated in pairs and quads, and lit the entire canopy of the sky with a dazzling exhibition of colors and patterned designs, each more magnificent than the one before. Omman's Capital City was crowded with thousands of inquisitive natives and tourists eager to watch the spectacle. As a steady succession of blaster fire and small arms discharge signaled the centennial celebration of the Moon Festival, citizens both young and old took to the streets and alleys where the real celebration would begin.

Drake was at home in Feyodor's Tavern, which was decorated in a dramatic arrangement of lights and jewels that simulated the constellations and star clusters of Omman's surrounding night sky. Organized behind the bar, an intricate grid of lights and fluorescent tubing created the illusion of waterfalls as the tiny bulbs faded and slowly returned to life in a seemingly endless mosaic of motion.

Drake grinned, using the table cloth to wipe the corner of his mouth. The biggest illusion was the grid itself and the clandestine innocence of its arrangement. Besides being one of the most unique pieces of artistry within several light years of the planet, it was in and of itself a work of masterful deception. Behind each of the winking lights was a carefully guarded code to signify a potential job offer or a contact with any number of smugglers, pirates, or bounty hunters, even corrupt Imperial liaisons that frequented the establishment. When a bulb was lit, it meant the individual was currently in the area and looking for work or that a potential client was in search of persons to enlist for a business venture.

Color-coded according to occupation, status, and need, the grid was an infamous galactic map of jobs and employers for the discriminating smuggler. Drake snorted softly, wiping the sweet powder from his lips. Synchronized within the diagram of the grid, in plain view, were thirty tables on the rooftop of the restaurant. Below were 100 or more booths inside the bar, each equipped with a centerpiece lamp or glass sculpture that was an ingenious part of the elaborate scheme.

For those too nervous to boast of their presence on the grid or for those too unknown to qualify, the centerpiece acted as a beacon for potential clients. Blue indicated a veteran talent, exclusive and expensive. Red was a warning signal, meaning the individuals at the table were a risk and Feyodor, the proprietor, would take no responsibility for their actions, faults, or failings.

There were other qualifying colors to cover the immense span of talent found at the tavern and in the local area. Feyodor controlled each centerpiece from his remote access panel behind the bar, changing colors as he saw fit to suit the situation. Yellow indicated that the party at the table was already hired, but the deal could be broken accordingly because a contract had not been agreed on. Green meant a clear go-no job, no contract, just hope. White was a mark of distinction, even among the celestial stars: it was the sign of a legend.

Drake smiled, pleased to note that Feyodor had seated them at a relatively private table with a white beacon. Their booth was the farthest from all the others, yet closest to the open-air bar. It was here that his father had made some of the most infamous deals of his smuggling career. In the past, this table remained open to Kaine Paulsen and a very young Drake, long after the closing hour, when the spice shipment had been delivered, the sector authorities tricked or bribed, and the payment given in full. And four years after Kaine's death the tavern owner still kept this table and one other, in deference to the smuggler and other men like him.

Drake sipped reflectively at his raava, his heart swelling with pride. Toying with the centerpiece, he was pleased that he had given the Corellian a subtle wink to indicate that his first mate and he were not for hire tonight. After surviving the last spice run from Kessel, with a trio of Imperial Star Destroyers on their tails, the young Socorran was in no mood for another risky job. And the Payoff from their cargo would keep Nikaede and him eating and living like royalty, at least for the next month, more or less, if they carefully weighed their luxuries.

"You know, " Drake said suddenly, "it was a good idea to dock the Steadfast out of town in that abandoned junkyard. We might actually get some honest down time on this trip. If no one sees the ship, they can't ask for us, right?" He listened to the Wookiee's throaty reply and the suggestion that followed it. "Yeah, I could go for a nice, hot bath myself. And I was thinking. Nik, maybe we could-"

"Are you Drake Paulsen?" Clutching an oversized canvas shoul-the woman tentatively approached the smuggler's table. "Captain Paulsen?" she whispered with an anxious smile, offering her hand to the Socorran.

Distracted by the alluring sway of fiery red curls, Drake stared over his shoulder at the intruding stranger. Reluctantly accepting her firm handshake, he shot a cautious glance across the table to his first mate. "Look, lady, " he said, attempting to ignore her. "we're off the clock so to speak. We're not taking any new jobs at the moment. "

Nikaede punctuated the statement with a firm growl and then returned to her rump of bantha meat, gnawing ferociously at the grizzle and bone. She stared at the stranger and grunted with satisfaction as the woman flinched under her intimidating gaze.

"I know. That's what the bartender told me, " the woman replied. She brushed a length of long hair from her face, uncovering her flushed cheeks. Drake noticed the slight tremor in her hands as she clutched protectively at the shoulder bag. She was dressed in flight gear, the fashionable style, worn by the feminine side of the smuggling venue-a low-cut blouse beneath a black, tapered waistcoat and polished, long-neck boots. Tight-fitting, black pirate leggings with a flirtatious frock of fabric at the hips left no curves to a nineteen-year-old smuggler's imagination.

"Look, Captain Paulsen, " she insisted, bending low over him to mask her husky voice from passersby. "I need a safe, sound ship and someone who knows how to fly her. I need special talent and I paid extra at the bar to find it. " She glanced back at the bar where Feyodor was watching them. A large, heavily built man, the Corellian smiled at her, holding up the credit chit she had left on the counter and pocketing it in his apron. He nodded to her and Drake to signal all clear and then went quietly back to his bartending.

"Please, Captain Paulsen. " Her blue eyes were alive and vibrant with the persistent flashing of fireworks arcing through the skies overhead. "I represent factions that will be more than happy to pay you upwards of 15, 000 credits if you accept the offer. Half now and the other half due on completion-"

"We don't leave port for less than 25, 000 creds. " Drake mumbled, hoping the exorbitant price would send the young woman on her way. "And there's a 5, 000-credit surcharge for the use of my first mate. " The Socorran hid a clever grin as Nikaede grunted abruptly, commending him for his efficient evasive maneuvering.

"That's 30, 000 credits?" she asked.

Drake pursed his lips and nodded. "That's 30, 000 credits. "

"Done!" Digging through her shoulder bag, she produced the necessary cred-stick and slammed it down on the table. "When can we leave?"

As the cred-stick rolled against his plate, Drake's eyes widened in shock. Picking it up, he read the scanner, startled to find it contained the full amount of the payment. He tossed it across the table to Nikaede, who took the small unit and toyed with the seal housing, convinced the monetary component was a fraud. After a moment, she shrugged, unable to find anything to support her suspicions.

"Now hold on, ah... " Drake started, stumbling as he realized he hadn't gotten the woman's name.

"Padija Anjeri. " She took his hand and shook it again.

"What's the cargo?"

"Myself and two other passengers. The only stipulation is that we must leave immediately. Will that be a problem?"

"Problem?" Drake glared across the table to Nikaede and then took a bite of the stuffed Uln bird. As the savory meat went down his throat, he was beginning to share Nikaede's contempt for the human woman and her abrupt intrusion of an otherwise captive evening and peaceful meal.

But the money was simply too great a temptation. He could see it reflected in his first mate's eyes, too. It was just that his smuggler's sense was teeming with suspicion. "I'll ask you one more time, " he whispered evenly, staring into his plate. "And either you start leveling with me about this gig or you can go right back to the bar and find yourself another chumani. " He met her startled expression with uncharacteristic menace. "Now what's the cargo?"

The woman suddenly looked as if she might faint, so Drake pulled out the chair next to him and offered it to her. She sat without a word.

"Here, have a swallow. You look like you need it. " He handed her his glass and watched her take a long sip. The Socorran sat back in the shadows, shielding the pleasure in his face as he watched her reaction to the powerful draught.

Wiping the tears from her eyes. Padija gasped as the bitter raava went down the back of her throat. "Guess, it's an acquired taste. " She winced at the aftertaste, handing the glass back to him. "Thanks. "

Across from her. Nikaede mumbled something around a hurried mouthful of bantha meat. The young woman listened intently to the melodic softness in the Wookiee's voice, apparently enthralled.

Don't get around much, I see, Drake thought as she looked quizzically at him.

"What did she say?"

"She's wondering if this is your first time, " he said.

"First time? First time for what?"

"Why don't you tell us, Padija Anjeri. " Drake sat back in his chair and smiled. He made no effort to move or to leave the tavern, and indicated that reluctance with his slouched posture. To ensure she got his point, he crossed his legs and settled against the back of his chair, as if planning to hang around for a while.

Padija took a deep, shuddering breath. "I wasn't trying to trick you about the cargo, " she began. "Myself, two other passengers, and-"

"And?" Drake interrupted.

"And this. " Padija set the shoulder bag on her lap and opened the top slightly to allow what little light there was to fall on the crystalline object inside. Constructed of one mass globule of polished, white crystallite, the sculpted head of a Twi'lek emerged from the darkness of the canvas bag. It gleamed and brightened with each flicker of light, seeming to attract and retain the illumination deep within its core. Molded to the sides of the sculpture, the head tentacles fanned out and wrapped themselves about the neck of the crystal, forming an even base for it to sit upright.

"Nice rock, " Drake whispered, feigning disinterest. "How much is it worth?"

Padija's face darkened, casting a pouting shadow over her attractive mouth and nose. "Can you put a price on the traditions and loyalty of a people? I think not. " She quickly covered the sculpture and swung the bag over her shoulder.

"I could put a price on a lot of things. " Drake whispered. "Including that rock of yours. " Absently waving his cutting knife at her, he added, "Where'd you get it?"

"I was told you wouldn't ask too many questions. " She folded her arms over her chest, glaring at the Socorran. "Do you want the job or not?"

Drake brushed a stray curl from his face. "I said, where'd you get it? And if I have to repeat myself again, I'll gladly give your money back and you can scratch gravel. "

"I'm an anthropology student on sabbatical from my university on Issor. I came here because I suspected this artifact had been removed from a settlement on Ryloth without order of the museum curator for the purpose of selling it on the black market. I'm well within my rights, " she said, "to appropriate its return to the museum immediately. Only, " the tightness melted from her face

"only I fear men who originally stole it want it back. " She eyed Drake sadly. "They want it quite badly. They might even kill to get it. "

"Anthropology, huh? Is that a fancy word for stealing?"

"It's not stealing! It's the study of the origins of ancient species and cultures. "

Drake continued to chew on his food, anxious to finish as much of it as he could before the insistent stranger pried him away from the gourmet meal. "Funny, you don't look like an anthropologist. " He stared at the blaster pistol strapped at her thigh. It was a sporting blaster, an odd tool for an anthropology student to carry.

"In the course of my studies. Captain Paulsen, I often come across ignorant people. " She straightened the gentle curvature of her spine, staring down her nose at the Socorran. "There are those who are so afraid of the truth, so fearful of the unknown that they would do anything to keep others, like me, from discovering it. " She leaned against the table, her face only a few centimeters from Drake's. "Let's just say my blaster allows me to pursue my studies in peace. "

Despite her naivete, there was a vehement passion in her words that Drake was forced to admire. Dabbing at his mouth, he threw the napkin onto the table and stood up. "Well, I guess you got yourself a ship. Miss Anjeri. "

"Call me Padija, " she said, grinning, her whole demure changing before his eyes. She was again the innocent young woman who had walked into the bar looking for a way off the planet.

"All right, " he sighed, "Padija. Where are your friends?"

"We're supposed to meet them on the corner of Bith and Kossh streets. " She hurried toward the stairwell that led down into the bar. "Follow me. "

Drake shrugged, staring at his food. He took one last bite of the Uln bird, savoring the taste. "Keep it warm, Feyo, " he told the Corellian. "I'll be back for it. "

"You got it, kid, " Feyodor replied, waving them away. "It'll be here waiting for you. "

* * *

It was well into the dawn hours. The last of the carnival fireworks had played themselves out, leaving behind a viscous ceiling of gray smoke. A thin drizzle of powdered debris fell from the skies, dusting the weary fair-goers. The fine ash covered their gaudy costumes and banners, signaling an end to the festivities. In segregated droves, the crowds broke into smaller segments and headed for the quiet shadows of their homes for continued celebration or peaceful slumber.

"I don't understand it, " Padija whispered. Her nervous hands pulled at the canvas bag, wrinkling the shoulder of her flight jacket. "They should have been here by now. They're nearly an hour overdue. "

Drake pursed his lips impatiently, offering her little comfort. Chewing on a mouthful of seed poppers, he winced as the sour aftertaste burned his overwhelmed tongue. Regretting the gourmet meal growing cold several blocks away, he frowned and tried to distract himself. The Socorran went to lean against the towering figure of his first mate. He stumbled backward a few steps as the Wookiee abruptly moved away from him. "What's with you?" he grumbled.

Nikaede's frantic voice was nearly drowned out in a renewed clatter of noise as a gang of youths galloped around the nearest corner. They were dragging a string of popping firecrackers along the cobblestone. The resounding racket reverberated in the narrow streets and alcoves.

"Blaster fire?" Drake questioned his partner. As the rowdy children moved away and the din of the small shells faded, he heard it—the distinctive pulse of blaster rifles echoing in a nearby alleyway. Cautiously pulling loose the restraint over his heavy blaster, Drake stared into the night fog as the sound spread down into the street. He looked for signs of drunken moon worshippers, who might be continuing their celebration after hours by shooting randomly into the night sky. But the skies above and the streets below were clear.

He strained to see into the shadows of a narrow back-alley channel, where discarded trash and mounds of garbage had been thrown to either side of the deserted streets. Then momentarily, Drake saw a figure moving between the trash heaps. Head tentacles rebounding from his shoulders, the sprinting Twi'lek was dressed in an orange work tunic and flight leggings. In the shadows, the alien appeared to be a jester, prancing about in the dark for the pleasure of an unseen audience.

Hurdling the massive piles, the Twi'lek ran into the light again. His legs moved with heavy, exhausted steps as if he might collapse with the next stride. After a moment, several blaster salvos followed him through the confined passage, scattering decomposing matter and incinerated garbage into the air around him.

"Halt!" came a filtered voice from the far shadows. The distant static of a comlink heightened Drake's apprehension. He froze instinctively, using the veil of darkness to his advantage as three Imperial stormtroopers emerged from the wall of smoke at the opposite end of the alley. In pursuit of their wearied quarry, they fired wild rounds into the empty streets. Their intentions were obvious, highlighted by their flagrant disregard for the personal safety of the Twi'lek or any other citizen who might accidentally step into harm's way.

As another round of blaster salvos lit the dark walls of the back city path, Drake heard the runner gasp softly as his body tensed with minute fits and convulsions. The stranger fell at Padija's feet, a blackened impact mark smoking from between his shoulders and the back of his tunic. Blood streaming from the corner of his mouth, the dying Twi'lek extended his arm toward Padija and pulled her down to him.

"Dr. Maa'cabe!" Padija said, quickly moving to his side. "Where's Colonel Renz?"

Maa'cabe shook his head and tried to raise himself up but failed, falling back into the collected trash. A strangled groan escaped his throat and his body convulsed violently, shuddering as if under a tremendous weight. After a moment, he was still.

"Dr. Maa'cabe!" Padija screamed. She squealed as a volley of blaster fire exploded around her. It forced her to jump back and away from the corpse.

Drake pulled Padija away from the Twi'lek's body and backed into another alley. He raised his hands, assuring the troopers of his intention to surrender. The Imperial soldiers slowed down to get a better look at the smuggler and his companions, then paused as they approached the Twi'lek's still form.

"What are you doing?" Padija whispered.

"Stalling." the smuggler replied behind a thin smile. He nodded to Nikaede, signaling the Wookiee to flank him on the left side. As the stormtroopers swung and leveled their blaster rifles toward them, the Socorran relaxed his shoulder, pivoting slightly on his right heel. Then abruptly, he dropped his shoulder and drew the heavy blaster from the holster with deadly accuracy.

As the first bolt exploded with green flame against the chest of the lead Imperial soldier, Drake was shoving Padija to the left side against his first mate. He fired again. The impact

from the blast knocked the second stormtrooper against the back wall and left him unconscious in a puddle of leaking sewage.

Dodging a wild ricochet from the remaining stormtrooper, Nikaede bumped Padija to the side and took a direct hit in the left shoulder. The Wookiee locked the bowcaster against her shoulder, bracing for the recoil, and bellowed a ferocious war cry as she fired. The bolt sprang from the modified trigger mechanism and shattered the stormtrooper's breastplate.

"There's going to be a lot of garbage today. " Ducking into the alley. Drake pulled Padija into the shadows behind him. "Was that one of your passengers?" he asked, running farther into the narrow channel.

"Dr. Maa'cabe, " she said, panting. She fumbled with the blaster at her thigh, drawing the weapon against her palm. As they continued their flight into the alley. Padija slipped and lost her footing on the damp surface of the cobblestone. Her blaster misfired as her finger reflexively pulled at the sensitive trigger.

Drake dropped to the ground, tucked, and rolled beneath the wild shot and the subsequent ricochet. "Watch what you're doing with that thing!" he shouted, pointing his blaster at her face.

As Padija started to say something back to him, her voice was cut off by renewed blaster fire. Nikaede pulled her to the side, allowing Drake a free shot at the Imperial stormtroopers pursuing them through the dark passage.

"You just watch what you're doing!" Padija screamed. She glared up at the Wookiee as Nikaede scooped her up and sprinted around a winding alley bend.

"Hey! Let me go. I can handle myself!" She struggled to free herself from the Wookiee's gentle but firm hold. Just then a blaster bolt exploded above her head, partially shattering the corner of the nearest building. It detonated with such a resounding force, Padija feared her eardrums were ruptured from the brunt of the explosion. Disoriented and confused, she slumped against Nikaede's warm body.

Outnumbered and outgunned, Drake took cover behind a mound trash and fired nearly point-blank into the lead stormtrooper's chest. The Socorran raised his blaster and took several more random shots. As a barrage of return fire illuminated the alley, he lunged into the side passage and raced into the shadows after his partner, inadvertently bouncing off Nikaede.

"What are you just standing there for?" Drake snapped. He held his ground as a heated roar of vulgar Wookiee syllables brought the color to his cheeks.

Holding a swaying Padija in one hand and her bowcaster in the other, Nikaede stared up the four-meter high fence and bawled dejectedly, her melancholy voice echoing against the solid plasteel structure. Then, gently shaking Padija's shoulders, she howled in the young woman's face.

"This'll shake her out of it, " Drake grunted. He pushed Padija against the wall, setting her hands out to each side of her. Then taking her leg, he gave her a boost toward the top of the fence

"What are you... " her voice trailed off into a succession of disgruntled squeals as her body flipped over the top of the barrier Drake stood back, listening over the intrusive pounding of his heart. "Padija?" There was silence on the opposite side. "Padija? Are you all right?" Drake shouted, hearing the approaching footfalls of their pursuers.

"I'll get you for this, Drake Paulsen, " a thin voice whispered. "Is this what you call 'special talent' at work?"

Drake grinned and put his blaster away. Nodding to Nikaede, he put his boot against the Wookiee's clasped hands and held on as she launched him over the side of the barrier. Careful to avoid the hunched shadow at the base of the fence, Drake dropped down to the other side. He again drew his blaster, scanning the streets for any sign of trouble. "Hurry up, Nik. It's clear. "

Padija screamed as a loud clicking noise scrapped against the top of the plasteel wall, causing sparks to ignite. Climbing claws fully extended, Nikaede's snarling face appeared over the top of the wall, followed by her shoulders and then the rest of her body. The Wookiee threw her great bulk to the side and hopped down from the barrier. As she dropped to the ground and sank to her knees to absorb the concussion, a barrage of blaster bolts rained down on them, coming over the raised barrier. Several shots impacted with the wall itself, causing stress fractures to spiral out from the point of concussion.

"From the looks of that. " Drake said, eyeing the shattered wall, "we can rule out being taken prisoner. "

"What now?" Padija whispered as she followed the smuggler into the deserted street beyond the alley.

"Why don't you tell me, lady? You got us into this mess. "

"Me? That's what I'm paying you for-"

Drake silenced her with a curt, dismissive gesture. Looking over her shoulders, he noticed a pair of Nightfalcon speeder bikes parked just inside a darkened overhang. The chain that

once secured the entrance into the garage structure was blackened with blast scoring-evidence of a forced entry.

Dropping his blaster to thigh level to conceal it, Drake stepped out into the deserted street, sweeping his gaze from one end of the broad avenue to the other. "Get to it, Nikaede, " he said, signaling her with a wave of his hand.

"Get to what?" Padija asked. Staring into the shadows as if something or someone might jump out at her, she clutched tightly at her shoulder bag. "What's she doing?"

The Wookiee disassembled the wire housing beneath the seat of the speeder bike. Sparks flew from the vehicle and the engine ignited with a loud clamor, prompting a snarl from the anxious Wookiee.

"She's getting us a ride out of here, " Drake replied, testing the frame of the Aratech 74-Z speeder bike. He gunned the engine, toggling the sensitive throttle controls.

"Do you know how to ride one of these things?" she asked, warily climbing onto the seat behind him. "I've heard these things cause more fatalities every year-"

"Guess you'll just have to trust me. " Drake smirked, the arrogance showing in his face.

"And just where are we going? The starport's probably swarming with Imperial troops by now. "

"If my ship were docked in the port. I might be worried. " He nodded as Nikaede brought the second speeder bike's engine online.

"I'm going to live to regret this, " Padija whispered, her voice Huffled against Drake's shoulders.

"Probably. " He spun the throttle, holding onto the steering bar as the bike lurched into the streets.

Blaster bolts exploded over their heads, causing Nikaetle to brake sharply to avoid being hit. The Wookiee's weight shifted without much warning, tipping the bike dangerously forward out of balance. She boosted the power to the repulsor engines to compensate and sped away after her partner.

"Keep your head down and do as I do, " Drake yelled. "When I lean, you lean!" He felt her nodding her chin against his shoulder in reply. A ricochet danced across the pavement, showering molten stone and debris across the tail section of their bikes. Drake leaned into the control panel and led the chase through the narrow, confining streets of the inner city.

Dodging blaster fire, the Soccoran swerved onto the main avenue and into the residential sections near the outskirts of the capital.

A pair of stormtroopers on repulsor sleds was waiting for them, Careening through the turn, Drake swore the worst of Socorran oaths as the Imperials opened fire on them. He gunned the throttle and accelerated around the next corner, struggling to keep control of the Aratech as it shifted wildly beneath their weight.

"What are you doing?" Padija shouted, ducking beneath the barrage of blaster fire. "This street is a dead end. Even I know that!"

"This calls for a little smuggler's sense, " Drake yelled over the wind. "Hold on. " He continued toward the looming barricade barring their escape. He grinned roguishly, feeling Padija's arms tightening at his waist. "This ought to shake them. "

He adjusted the repulsorlift engine and hurdled the four-meter-tall barricade. Holding the bike controls steady, he dropped back to ground level and managed to turn in the air, leaving space for Nikaede to safely navigate the wall.

The leading Imperial rider miscalculated the maneuver. Drake winced as the stormtrooper slid through the dangerous turn and then crashed into the buildings on the opposite side of the barrier. The resulting explosion tripped up the next rider, sending him and his bike careening into the shadows at the base of the wall.

"Please tell me you have a plan. " Padija buried her face against his shoulder.

"There's a smuggler's hideout in the woods. My father used to camp out there when the sector authorities got a little too close. Drake glanced over his shoulder to check on their pursuers. I here were none. "We can make it to the hideout on foot, once we're clear of the city. "

Slamming the brake mechanism. Drake skidded through an impromptu bootlegger's turn and into a main commons area and merchant square. Another squad of stormtroopers was waiting for them. Shielding his vehicle behind the blue spray of an elaborate fountain. Drake measured the distance he needed to cover between them and the city gate. He skirted the edge of the fountain and gunned the engines, tilting the bike to the side. The Aratech's engines bucked in protest, sending a wall of foam into the advancing squad. Momentarily blinding them. Drake took the advantage of the temporary cease fire and accelerated toward the gates. He smiled as Nikaede kept tight formation on his right flank. Together, they hurdled the wall and accelerated into the open country beyond the capital.

Drake continued toward the forest, looming just ahead of them. The hidden entrance to the smuggler's alcove would be tucked away in the massive hollow of a fallen tree. And beneath it lay an intricate system of tunnel works that would lead them away to safety.

"Drake, we've got company!" Padija shouted. She pointed to a trio of Imperial stormtroopers, each mounted on a repulsorlift sled. They were firing randomly into the darkness, lured by the repulsor field emissions.

Near the entrance to the forest, a blaster bolt caught Drake's tail section and grounded the damaged bike. The Aratech shuddered, flipped forward, and somersaulted, leaving a trail of gray smoke behind it. Drake felt the nausea of sudden weightlessness as his body flew through the cold, night air. He heard Nikaede's distant, frantic screaming and a cacophony of renewed blaster fire.

With a splash, the bike landed in a small creek near the eastern edge of the forest. The wrecked vehicle then exploded with such force that Drake, even in his bewildered condition, struggled to cover his face and ears. He landed nearby in a thicket at the creek's edge. Rolling in the water reeds surrounding the shore, he came to a sudden halt as his head struck a rock. As the shallow water seeped into his jacket and pants, the young Socorran was still, pleasantly numbed by the blow to the head.

"Drake!" He heard Padija's panicked voice and then her hands on his face. Groaning miserably as the pain spiked at his temple, he rolled to his side.

"Drake, please snap out of it. They're coming!" Drake heard the distinctive fire of a Wookiee bowcaster and recognized the boosted power modulation of Nikaede's modified weapon. The sound brought him back abruptly and he sat up, staring at Padija with a disconcerted expression on his face. There were a few scratch marks across her cheek, but she was no worse for wear. Then he felt the warm trickle of blood running from the corner of his temple.

"Drake?" Padija took a handkerchief from her pocket and quickly dabbed it into the cold water, wiping the blood from his face. "Drake, snap out of it. "

Brushing her hand away, Drake shook the tangle of water reeds from his head and chest, then stood up. "I'll be fine, " he slurred, still dazed from the fall. He swayed unsteadily, feeling her supporting hands at his shoulder. The explosion of a thrown grenade jump-started the Socorran's reflex. "Nikki! Let's go!" He jogged toward the interior of the forest, pulling Padija along beside him.

As Nikaede fell in stride behind them, he sped up the pace, searching the darkness for the hidden alcove. Drake took a glowrod from his belt and quickly scanned the nearby trees, searching for the opening that had brought Nikaede and him from the junkyard on the

other side of the forest into the city limits. Abruptly, the beam of his light fell across a sudden splash of white-on-black armor. The Socorran threw himself and Padija to the side as the stormtrooper scouts opened fire. "Nikaede, get down!"

"How did they get here so fast?" Padija screamed as the troopers charged them.

"I don't know and I don't plan on asking them. Come on. " He pulled her up from the ground, dodging a second barrage as Nikaede covered them.

They moved deeper into the shadowed woodland. As they circled a large tree, Padija stumbled over a snare of exposed roots and fell at Drake's heel. "Where is it? Where is this place?" she cried, her voice cracking.

"Back there, " Drake grumbled. "The Boys In White were all but sitting on top of it. So much for losing them. "

"What?" She slowly got to her feet, shaking the mud from her hands and wrists. "What are we going to do?"

Drake heard the fear in her voice. "Well, we can't stay out here. " He drew his blaster and took a defensive position in the trees. Following Nikaede's instinctive gestures, he fired and brought down the leading scout. Across from him, standing in the branches of a nearby tree, Nikaede took cover and fired from the shadows, downing the second scout before he could retreat out of range. "Are you crazy?" Padija hissed. "You can't fight them all off. "

"Well, unless you've got a better idea, " Drake retorted, "we're stuck here. There's no way we're going to outrun them on foot. And I don't know about you, but I certainly don't have any inclinations toward taking up mining in the Emperor's good name-"

His voice was cut short by a desperate scream beyond them. There was a peculiar pulsing sound ten meters beyond their position in the area where the alcove was hidden. As Drake stared through the skeletons of the trees, a slim, white shaft of light ripped through the darkness and struck clown one of the advancing stormtroopers and then another before moving on to the next.

Padija recognized the distinctive sound of a lightsaber. "You're alive!" she cried. She started toward the figure, but Drake held her back. "It's okay. " she whispered, gently brushing his hands away. "He's one of the passengers. "

Drake slowly moved through the darkness toward the sound. He hatched in spellbound fascination as the shadow wielding the lightsaber stepped directly into the field of fire, deflecting a barrage blaster bolts. As the lightsaber traced a path of devastation through the darkness, its wielder converged on the next scout, slicing him through at the torso.

Through the thinning perimeter of trees, the five sister moons cast their brilliance on the surface below. Distracted by the sound of repulsor engines, Drake turned in time to see the stormtrooper who had followed them from the city. The Imperial's armor was still scuffed from his near miss at the base of the city-district barrier. As the soldier raised his rifle to fire, Drake raised his blaster and shot first. The bolt struck the undercarriage of the repulsor sled detonating the engines. In a ball of orange and red flames the stormtrooper's body was propelled several meters into the air. He smashed through a thick crosswork of tree branches before plummeting back to the ground.

Padija ran into the stranger's arms and embraced him. He was a handsome man in his early forties, wearing a brown cloak over the ruined garment of a carnival costume. There was a black scorch mark on his right shoulder, where he'd apparently been shot and wounded. As Padija held him, he slowly sank to his knees, dragging her to the ground with him. "Colonel Renz!" She brushed the grime from his face, struggling to support his weight against her slight frame. "I thought you were dead. " Padija embraced him again, trembling.

"Dr. Maa'cabe?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Dead. "

Renz nodded soberly, breathless from his injuries. "I felt the disturbance of his passing. A terrible loss, tragic. And the crystal skull?" He swayed unsteadily, bracing himself against a nearby tree.

"I still have it. You needn't worry. But what happened with you and Maa'cabe? I thought we were clear. "

"Remember that Imperial captain we left for dead?" Renz smiled weakly. "Well he wasn't as dead as Maa'cabe thought. He identified us to the museum commissioner who put out an all-points-bulletin. They recognized Maa'cabe immediately. "

"Well I got a smuggler to get us offworld. One of the best, the bartender assured me. "

"Is he?" Renz managed to broaden his thin smile and glanced up at Drake. "I should think that I am indebted to you. Captain-"

"Drake, " Padija interceded, "Captain Drake Paulsen. And that's his first mate, Nikaede. "

"I owe you one. Captain Paulsen. " Renz extended his hand, weakly shaking Drake's.

"Let's just call it even, " Drake whispered, cautiously eyeing the cylindrical object in Renz's other hand. The Socorran quickly glanced about him, scanning the shadows. "I hate to break this up-but they'll be back. And I don't fancy staying on to greet them. "

* * *

He scrambled up a small mound of underbrush, pulling himself up on a nearby tree branch. He examined the entrance to the underground hideout. The underbrush was in disarray, indicating where someone had fallen into the hidden channel below.

"I see you found my father's favorite hiding spot, " Drake said.

"Let's just say it was dumb luck. " Renz groaned as he tried to sit up. Even with Padija's support, he could not get to his feet and slumped against her, exhausted from the effort.

"My ship's about five kilometers from here, eight once we work our way through the tunnels. I suggest we get back there and hide out until it's clear. "

"Eight kilometers!" Padija quickly examined the wound using Drake's glowrod. "He'll never make it. It's too far. "

"We'll all make it, " Drake insisted. "Nik, get him up. " He cautiously navigated the climb back down from the concealed entrance and helped the Wookiee hoist the injured man over her broad back. Taking a medpac from his first mate's waist pouch, he pulled Renz's ruined tunic aside and firmly pushed an emergency pressure bandage against his shoulder. Nikaede braced herself and held the man's arms as he flinched suddenly beneath the onslaught of pain that followed.

"That'll have to do for now. We can fix him up once we get farther into the tunnels. "

"And what's to stop them from following us down?" Padija challenged.

"She's right, " Renz said between clenched teeth. "This place is full of false corridors and forking passages. And unless you know the route-"

"And unless you know the route, " Padija interrupted, "we could die in those tunnels. And no one would ever find our bodies. "

"My father and I hid out here enough times that I could find my way in the dark. " Winking at Padija, Drake picked up Nikaede's bowcaster and shouldered the heavy weapon. "Don't worry. " he whispered, guiding her into the tunnel after his first mate. "We won't get lost, I promise. "

He followed them into the alcove after securing the entrance, then led them down into the hidden passages below.

* * *

Dissipating into the upper atmosphere, the last thin covering of haze and smoke evaporated into the night skies above Omman. Twelve kilometers from the main starport, on the grounds of an abandoned repair facility, thirty or more exterior flight lots were scattered haphazardly between dilapidated hangars, out-shelters, and the stripped, corroded remains of antiquated spacecraft left in the docks for scrap. Above the vacant docking moors and ghostly platforms, the five sister moons of Omman cast a rare, blue brilliance over the haunted phantoms of the junkyard and the hull of the Steadfast.

Padija stared despondently into the distant lights of the Capital City and frowned. From the top of the Steadfast, they had a clear view of the highest city structures, including the starport. A frenzy of activity encompassed the night skies above the port and the adjoining Meril Power Station. "Have you seen anything like it?" she asked distractedly.

"Like what?"

"The moons, silly, " she replied, staring into the striking brilliance of the port and the backdrop of Omman's moons in the distance.

Leaning against the communications disk. Drake straightened his tall frame. "Nothing like it within a hundred light years or more. "

Padija took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Do you think the Imperials will come looking for us here?"

"I doubt if they'll come out this far. The Empire's known for its single-mindedness. They'll concentrate their troops and ships on the starport, hoping that we'll try to sneak back into the city and then into the port. " Drake followed her gaze to the lights of the Omman capital, sensing her anxiety and need for distraction. "How's the old man?"

"He's sleeping peacefully now. Nikaede offered to watch him for me. " She turned her head slightly so as to hide the tear streaming down her cheek. "I needed to get some fresh air. "

After a moment she mustered a thin smile. "Ouch, " she whispered, noting the discoloration around his eye. "Did you do that falling off the speeder bike? I told you those things were dangerous. Let me have a look at that. " She took the glowrod from Drake's belt and covered the light with her hand to shield them from discovery.

Squinting into the abrupt glare, Drake flinched at the gentle prodding of her fingers. Nearly a head taller than her, he tilted his chin upward in protest to the examination and tolerated her impatient glare with an impish grin.

"Be still!" she insisted, observing the bruise swelling at his temple and around his left eye. "That's going to swell shut in another hour. Do you have any chill pacs?"

"In the medkit. " He pointed to the small satchel laying beneath the laser turret. A bundle of bloody antiseptic wipes was laying beside it from where he had cleaned the superficial cuts suffered in the fall from the speeder bike. He winced as he gently ran his fingertips over the bruise.

Padija retrieved the chill pac and gave it a firm shake. The motion and a slap against her thigh activated the cooling solution inside. "So tell me something. Drake Paulsen. " She pressed the pac gently against his face and held it there. "How did you know about that tunnel system and this abandoned repair port? Feyodor said you were a special talent. But I never suspected anyone could be this good. "

Drake laughed, gasping sharply as the small cut in the corner of his mouth pulled. "When I was a kid, my father used to bring me along on his smuggling runs. Educational excursions, he used call them. He taught me everything I know, including when not to dock your ship in the main starport. " The Socorran smiled down at her. "Especially if you're not looking to get hired for a job. "

His humor was infectious, causing Padija to chuckle along with him. "He must be proud, your father. "

"He would be, if he were alive. "

Padija's face darkened abruptly. "Drake, I am so sorry. I had no intention to pry. "

Drake tightened his smile and shook his head to lay her fears to rest. He took her hand gently in his, feeling a warm flush spread through his body when she did not pull away. "You needn't be sorry. " he whispered. "The people responsible-they're the ones who should be sorry. "

"Is that what put a price on your head?" Padija shivered as a night wind swept across the top of the freighter. She used that moment to move closer to the smuggler, encircling his thin waist with her arms.

"How do you know about that?"

"Told you. " she giggled, "I paid good money to find some special talent. Feyodor volunteered that information. He was trying to scare me off, I think. "

"Obviously it didn't work. " Drake laughed, breathing in the sweet scent rising from her spiraled curls. "Well, " he sighed, thinking of an explanation. "I happened to stumble onto one of the people responsible for killing my father. And let's just say Socorran edicts of retribution are quite strict about that sort of thing. "

"Gylif fho ihn gylif. "

"A life for a life. That's pretty good, where'd you learn that'"

"I took Old Corellian as a minor at the Issori university. But my professor. " she shook her head dubiously, "could never have prepared me for this little side adventure. He'd have a coronary if he ever set foot down here and relived our escape from the city. This is the real history, Drake, not what you read about in those white-washed historical recordings. "

"So what happened with your studies?"

"Professor Arner said I had a future, if I dropped all of my major courses and followed him across the galaxy to do field research. " Laying her head against Drake's shoulder, she sighed. "I turned him down because it sounded too dangerous. Now look at me. I'm no better off. " Padjia laughed quietly. "I've had enough excitement in the last two weeks to last me three lifetimes. But no more, I'm going back to Issor as soon as this whole affair is over, dropping my courses, and finding myself a rich husband. "

Drake grinned, running his hand through her hair. "What about your work with the museum?"

"What about it?" she replied curtly. "I never did like playing in the dirt. And I never ever want to see another dead body as long as I live. I don't care if it is 5, 000 years old. "

Adjusting the chill pac. Drake leaned his head against her forehead and laughed. "How will you know when you've met the right man? I mean, who knows? He might be waiting for you on some exotic excavation on the Outer Rim. And I'm sure if he's one of those anthropologist types, he won't have a whole lot of money. He might just be a smuggler-"

Padjia gently put her finger to his lips, silencing him. "Aanor ishiia zals. That's what Professor Arner used to always say-love conquers all. " Staring into his eyes, she wondered at the little boy hidden away in the Omman scrapyard with his smuggler father. Now a man and a smuggler himself, he held her in his arms beneath five full moons.

Padija stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his, kissing him gently at first, then with growing passion. As they parted, Padija leaned into her warm body against his. "Tell me about Socorro, Drake. What's it like?"

Drake closed his eyes, recovering from the intimate contact. He hesitated before replying, listening to the gentle whisper of her breathing. "Hot. "

"How hot?"

"Very, very hot. "

"And what do you do there... to get away from the heat?"

"Oh, we have ways, " Drake whispered hoarsely, "to keep cool. "

Nikaede's voice abruptly broke the rush of emotion between them. The Wookiee started to climb through the access hatch, then saw the two humans standing so closely together in the moonlight. She paused in shock, cut herself short, and quickly retreated into the shadows inside the ship, grumbling under her breath.

"What did she say?" Padija asked, still cradling her head against Drake.

The Socorran shook his head, forcing his knees to remain solid beneath him. "I wasn't listening. " He bowed his head against Padija's, then gently moved away from her. "I have a feeling she's anxious to leave and I agree with her. We better not hang around any longer than we have to. Come on, let's see what they're up to above the starport. "

Leading Padija by the hand, he stepped down into the Steadfast's access tunnel, helping her down the ladder and into lower corridor. Nikaede's hulking shadow was waiting in the wing. The Wookiee shook her head dubiously, looking from Drake to Padija, and then handed the lightsaber to her blushing captain. She bawled an abrupt insult that only Drake could understand and then returned to her station on the bridge.

Staring at the peculiar weapon. Drake asked, "Is Renz for real? A Jedi like in those cheap hoio-comics?" He handed her the lightsaber, dodging her elbow as she retaliated for the imprudent comment.

"Of course he's for real! Before Senator Palpatine declared all the Jedi traitors of the New Order, the Jedi Knights were the most revered people in the society. " She followed the smuggler into the corridor, holding his hand as he gently led her through the darkened passages. "My father fought in the Clone wars, you know? He was a hero. That's how he got his rank. "

"Father?" Drake spat, turning on her. "Renz is your father? But your last name-"

"In Alderaanian tradition, it's not unusual for the only daughter to take her mother's maiden name. Out of respect for the maternal side of the family. " She paused as he just stared inanely at her. "What! Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you, " he taunted, continuing through the passage.

Padija grinned astutely. "Helps keep the folks around me on their toes. " She winked mischievously and proceeded to the end of the hall.

On the flight bridge. Drake paused at the navigation system bringing the astrogation computer online. "Where do you need to go?"

"Derora. It's a small moon in the Birjis system. "

"Derora it is. " He punched in the coordinates. "It's going to take a while for the computer to coordinate a precise path into that system. We've never been there before and we want to make certain, right?" Drake winked at her. Seeing her smile, he sat down in his acceleration chair. "So tell us about this artifact you pinched. Why's the Empire so intent on getting it back. "

Nikaede bawled her own curious questions about the idol. Resetting her control panel for pre-flight preparations, she craned her neck around to stare at Padija and the canvas bag sitting beneath her chair.

"Nikaede wants to know, too. She asked if having it was worth the life of your companion and the trouble we've been through. " Glaring at the Wookiee, he pointed his finger at her. "Be nice. " he gruffed in Socorran.

"It was very much worth it. Nikaede, and for reasons you will well appreciate. " Padija said. "If Dr. Maa'cabe were here now, he'd tell you the same. The idol belongs to a very primitive, very old, militaristic clan of the Twi'lek people. They inhabit the darkest region of the planet, living in much the same manner as they existed 3, 000 years ago. Supposedly, " Padija shrugged, adding her own doubts to the statement, "the 1. 000-year old ashes of an ancient Twi'lek hero were crystallized and the crystal itself sculpted in his likeness to honor him. According to Dr. Maa'cabe's research, there are two others that exist; and each skull presides over a certain ceremony of clan life-the Jasshi'rr, the Waala, and the Keysshi. "

"Marriage, Law, and History, " Drake translated. Padija's smile widened. "Now who's full of surprises? In any case, Waala is the most important, being the law. Every major political decision is conferred on, agreed on, and enacted-but only in the presence of the skull. "

"Why would that make the idol so important to the Empire?"

"Not just the Empire, but rather the Emperor himself. There were rumors the Rebel Alliance was pushing for an allegiance with the Twi'leks. Somehow the Empire heard about it and took action to prevent the allegiance from happening. "

"If the Emperor wanted to quell any possible dissension, he could have sent a fleet of Star Destroyers to Ryloth and decimated the entire Twi'lek population. "

"But Ryloth is one of the Empire's biggest sources for slave labor even though their Intelligence reports deny it. Why plunder the herd and the best stock when there's still work to be done. The Emperor sought to disunite the clans, causing civil unrest, not to destroy them. "

"That's not hard to do with Twi'leks unfortunately. "

"But without the idol, the Nercathi clan would be helpless unable to act or agree among themselves or their neighbors. Their more industrial relatives don't care. When the Empire, or more likely the Hutts, come looking for slaves, the Nercathi, are the logical choice because they have no guidance or leadership to defend themselves. "

"So then what happened?"

"Well, six months ago the Rebel Alliance began holding secret meetings with the Twi'lek delegation in the hopes of reviving the chances of an allegiance. The Alliance negotiators were desperate and prepared to do anything to win over the Twi'leks, even if it meant finding this idol and stealing it back from the Empire. "

"So they hired you?"

"And Dr. Maa'cabe and my father. The Emperor suspected the Alliance might make a move to recapture the idol, sealing the contract between the Twi'leks and Rebel factions. Several frauds were created to throw any agents off the trail. Only a trained archaeologist would know the difference, so it was a trained archaeologist they sent, in fact three, including myself. "

"The Rebel Alliance, huh?"

Padija's face paled in the instrument lights flashing from the command module. "I failed to mention that, didn't I?" She shrugged apologetically.

Powering the Steadfast's engines, Drake toggled the individual flight switches and guided the ship up from the flight pad. Carefully monitoring the sensors, he set the astrogation

computer as the freighter accelerated through Omman's upper atmosphere. The Socorran shook his head warily. Rebel Alliance? He and his first mate were lucky to even be alive. "So tell me, do you have any other surprises I should know about?"

Padija kissed him quickly on the cheek and then returned to her chair to strap herself in. "Not yet, but if I think of any, I'll let you know"

* * *

Seated on a platform above the enormous sand-rock caverns of Derora, Drake stared out from the observation deck into the Rebel garrison and hangar bays. Eyeing the immense assortment of medium transports in the crowded docking arena, he shook his head in quiet fascination. Three bulk freighters and several slightly blast-scored Corellian Gunships were situated at the back of the docking facility near the fighter bays. Perched within the shadows of the massive ships, on a small platform, the Steadfast was a thin sliver of off-white metal. The Ghtroc freighter appeared to be a sand flea in the presence of its more formidable docking partners.

Drake closed his eyes and sat back, his belly warm and full of Rishi honeystix and roasted nerf meat. "Padija, that was delicious. " Taking the napkin from his thigh, he dabbed at the corners of his mouth and tossed it onto his plate. He winked at Nikaede, laughing as the lethargic Wookiee gruffed a brief comment about the food. Drake could see the pain in her eyes, the agony of being completely and totally satiated.

Abruptly, the Wookiee belched, turning heads in the mess hall area. She rubbed her belly, soothing the ache of her distended stomach and belched again, this time more quietly.

"You need to take a nap. " Drake teased. He turned to Padija and winked at her. "She always gets this way when she eats too much. Think she'd learn her lesson by now-"

The Socorran ducked a slow swat that brushed past his ears. Playfully, he blocked Nikaede's second attempt to strike him.

"I figured I owed you both a decent dinner, " Padija said over a glass of Corellian mist wine. Dressed in a stunning red gown that complemented the flushed drink, she smiled warmly. "Oh look, they've arrived safely. " She stood up, taking Drake's hand, and together they went to the extended pier over the flight deck.

Staring from the observation deck, they watched as a crowd of Alliance officers, dressed in full regalia, arrived at the garrison entrance, flanked by their escorts. Within moments, a

delegation of Twi'leks walked into the bay. Colonel Renz appeared from the rank of Rebel officers, dressed in the traditional robes of a Jedi Knight.

His arm was in a sling, but that did not prevent him from carrying the felt red bag containing the crystal skull. With a bow, Renz presented the idol to the leading representative.

"So what now?" Drake asked. "They have their relic back. What does the Alliance gain for all its trouble?"

"Some loyal allies-"

"Twi'leks?" He laughed. "I've heard them called many things, but never loyal, Padija. They sell their own families into slavery. "

"The spark of unification must start somewhere, Drake. " She took his arm and leaned against him. "Today, it's one clan. Tomorrow, a city. In time, we might count on the Twi'lek homeworld as our ally. "

"I wouldn't hold your breath. "

Drake watched the formal ceremony with interest. While trying to maintain some semblance of calm, the Twi'lek delegate fumbled anxiously with the seals to open the carrier, nearly dropping the entire package in his haste. Renz deftly caught the bag, steadying the anxious Twi'lek. There was a moment of nervous laughter as the felt carrier was opened and the skull presented to the delegation for formal inspection.

A look of serenity spread acrosses the faces of the lead Twi'lek representative and his associates. Each bowed in turn to the Alliance officers and Renz. Drake was certain that the thanks of an entire clan was being given at that illustrious moment.

Colonel Renz pointed to the observation deck inside the garrison. The Rebel officers and Twi'lek delegation followed his hand to where Padija and Drake stood above the hangar bays. It was not hard to make them out in the brilliant interior, particularly with Nikaede's towering silhouette standing at their side. With the same utter respect, each Twi'lek bowed in turn to them. Padija held Drake's hand tightly and curtsied as the Socorran inclined his head.

Then with ceremonious order, the Twi'lek delegation, at the invitation of the Alliance officers, paraded into the hangar and disappeared into a docking tunnel beneath the main flight bay.

"Where are they going?" Drake asked, bending over the rail to follow their shadows.

Padija playful brushed a curl from his forehead. "They're going to sign the first of several allegiances between the Twi'lek people and the Rebel Alliance. " Her face was glowing with pride as she rocked back and forth on her heels and toes. "One more ally in the struggle against the Emperor. One more bright star to light the way for others who wish to join us. "

"Why weren't you down there? You're as much responsible for getting that idol off the planet as your father. "

"I could have been there, " she grinned mischievously, embracing him. "But I wanted to be with you. That was more important, at least to me. And my father agreed. " Running her hands along the slope of his shoulders, she whispered. "General Cracken asked that you be there to meet the delegation as well, he thinks that you two, " she smiled up at Nikaede, "are the true heroes. But, " Padija coiled one of his curls about her finger and tugged gently, "I read in one of my classes that Socorrans are a notoriously practical people who relish simplicity and avoid ceremony. I didn't think it would be appropriate to put you in a position where you might be uncomfortable. "

Nikaede bawled a caustic response to the explanation, causing Drake to laugh outright. "Nikki says, you didn't ask her. Wookiees have no problem with ceremonies of that sort. "

"Next time. Nikaede, I promise. " As the smile faded from her lips, Padija stared into Drake's eyes. "The Alliance could use someone like you. Drake. It's not often the Rebellion can afford to pay these kinds of fees, but General Cracken was ecstatic. He says you were worth every single credit. He's willing to pay you an additional..."

Drake kissed her suddenly, cutting off her appeal. "I think I've had enough idle intentions for one day. Padija. Besides, if you need me, you know where to find me. And tell Feyodor that you don't have to pay any extra creds next time. " He signaled Nikaede that it was time to go.

Padija laid her head against his shoulder, forcing the smuggler to hesitate. Clearing the blur of tears from her eyes, she straightened and reluctantly stepped away from him. "Drake?" She bit her lip, fighting back tears as he moved past her to the stairs leading down into the bay. "How do Socorrans say good-bye?"

"Ol'val, that's Old Corellian. It's what smugglers use among their friends."

"But in Socorran, what do they say?"

"They don't. " Drake smiled. "There are no such words. Socorrans believe that once you've met a person, you're destined to meet them again. No point in saying good-bye. "

Padija nodded her understanding. She attempted to wave, but quickly put her hand down, lips trembling with emotion. "Ol'val then, Drake. Nikaede. "

Nikaede barked a succinct farewell, but Drake was silent, staring at Padija. Then following the Wookiee's lead, he trotted down the stairs and into the bay toward his ship. At the ramp of the Steadfast, he turned to stare across the bay to the observation deck. She was still standing there, watching him.

Drake stepped into the interior corridor, lingering at the sight of her. The ramp closed with resounding finality, sealing her off from his vision. As Nikaede lumbered toward the flight bridge, Drake remained a moment longer in the passage. "Good-bye, Padija, " he whispered. With a smile, the Socorran sauntered into the flight bridge to prep the Steadfast for lift off.

Crimson Jailbreak

You and your owner, Mistress Crimson, have just landed on the planet of Byblos, a world with an astonishingly immense population.

Most of the citizens live in large city towers which climb into the bright blue Byblos sky. Mistress Crimson has landed her ship, *Starlight Red*, in starport tower 214, level 3301, docking bay 789012634. You've never been to Byblos before, but you've heard wonderful stories of the architectural wonders of the city towers, as well as tales of the bustling city tower streets. What a fine opportunity to visit this engaging starport.

"You'd better stay on the ship," Mistress Crimson suggests on her way to the cargo bay. "Byblos can be pretty confusing for us organics, so it's got to be completely incomprehensible to droids like you. Besides, I don't want you getting lost out there and having some sleazy pirate steal you for spare parts."

Oh, my. Perhaps Byblos is a bit too dangerous for a droid like you. You decide it's best to stay with the ship — to monitor its systems while Mistress Crimson conducts business, of course.

You make yourself comfortable in the *Starlight Red's* cockpit while Mistress Crimson unloads some crates of supplies. You're not quite certain what exactly you're carrying in the cargo hold — and you rarely make it your business to know. Mistress Crimson has involved herself in several less-than-legitimate schemes in the past which often involve transporting illegal cargoes. Smuggling is a profession best left alone by simple droids.

While you're sitting in the cockpit, your gaze wanders outside the transparisteel viewport to examine certain aspects of the docking bay. Through the wide entrance you can see outside onto the surface of Byblos — not too far away you can already count at least 10 other city towers at least as high as the one you're in now. You look along one wall where a technician is unfurling a power conduit, probably to recharge your ship's fuel cells. Near the entrance to the starport is a small office for the bay supervisor, who is standing near the entrance talking with an Imperial stormtrooper sergeant.

Oh, my, was that a stormtrooper sergeant? Could Mistress Crimson be in some sort of trouble?

You shuffle from the cockpit and head for the ship's entry ramp. Proceeding cautiously down the ramp, you hear the rough voices of other stormtroopers coming from the cargo hatch — where Mistress Crimson was unloading her crates! You peer around one of the entry ramp's struts to see stormtroopers sifting through several open crates — although you can't see into them, you're almost certain the crates contain some kind of contraband substance. And then you see two stormtroopers placing restraining binders around Mistress Crimson's wrists! Oh, my!

As the stormtroopers lead Mistress Crimson out of the docking bay, she turns toward the *Starlight Red* and silently mouths some words to you: "Help ... me ... out ... of ... this." Oh, no! Mistress Crimson is in trouble!

Are you ready?

As you watch the stormtroopers lead Mistress Crimson out of the docking bay entrance, your voluminous droid mind becomes cluttered with worries and harried plans to rescue her. There are several rational options available to you, but you require more information before formulating any complete plan. Besides, you're not terribly good at this hero stuff.

The docking bay technician is busy checking several power conduits near a refueling station. You emerge from the *Starlight Red's* entry ramp and shuffle over to the busy tech.

"Excuse me," you say. "Hello, could you tell me where those Imperial stormtroopers were taking the captain of that ship?" You point toward the *Starlight Red*, hoping the tech has some idea what you're talking about.

The tech doesn't even look up from his work. "Those stormtroopers are from the Imperial Customs office on this level," he says. "I think they're taking her down to the office for questioning or something. I guess they found some sort of violation or contraband." The technician looks up and surveys the ship. "Yeah, it was probably a weapons violation. See those quad lasers on the ventral gunnery mount? Illegal as a freed Wookiee. I'm surprised we haven't received a requisition to remove them ..."

You thank the technician. If you're going to rescue Mistress Crimson, you'd better head down to the Imperial Customs office.

The starport corridors are bustling with buzzing aliens, zooming cargo skiffs, bargaining spacers, binary load lifter droids and grimy technicians. Everywhere you look you see entrances to docking hangars, repair bays, and storage areas. You pause at the entrance to one docking bay to ask directions to the nearest Imperial Customs office, but the angry Rodian there barks at you to go away. A nearby

binary load lifter droid unloading heavy crates from a cargo skiff is more than happy to give you rather simplistic (and hopefully accurate) directions.

You continue shuffling around the starport corridor until you reach the rather officious-looking facade to the Imperial Customs office, Byblos Tower 214, Level 3301. Part of the facade is an open arch which leads into a main lobby and a desk. Inside are Imperial Customs officers and stormtroopers. Several stormtroopers have escorted Mistress Crimson to the lobby desk, where she is being interrogated by an angry Imperial Naval officer.

Your experience has demonstrated that trying any rational means to negotiate with Imperials often has rather unsuccessful and sometimes deadly consequences. It looks like you're going to have to try this "heroic rescue" nonsense and formulate some kind of plan to break Mistress Crimson free of her captors. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to stage some sort of diversion ...

Looking around the starport, you notice the abundance of Human and alien spacers. Near the entrance to one docking bay you see the angry Rodian you asked directions from earlier. If you could rouse his temper again and get him to follow you toward the Imperial Customs office, he might prove to be a rather entertaining diversion.

You decide the best way to accomplish this is to bait the Rodian with some petty insult. Delivering this insult in the Rodian's native language would most likely enrage him even further. You head over to the Rodian and interrupt his conversation with a Twi'lek spacer.

"Ne linga ne hochka," the Rodian says to you. You're not quite certain what it means. No matter. You begin to berate him with insults.

"Le nochka, tuo halack ne ladda buchak," you say in Rodian, commenting on the spacer's lack of common courtesy and his obvious lack of good looks. The Rodian turns to you and sneers. You try another phrase. "Toska ne linga voe bashkal."

The Rodian slowly reaches for the heavy blaster pistol at his side. You perceive this as a most opportune moment to head back to the Imperial Customs office, baiting the Rodian with further insults as you totter along through the crowded starport corridor. "Toska ne linga voe bashkal!" you call again, looking behind you to make certain the Rodian is following. You repeat the insult again.

Sure enough, the Rodian leaves his Twi'lek companion and begins following you, waving his heavy blaster pistol in the air and shouting something that loosely translates as "Come back here you rusty tin bucket." You quickly shuffle off to the Imperial Customs office as fast as your metal legs can carry you.

A blaster bolt sizzles past your head! The Rodian is shooting at you!

You dodge a few shots from the Rodian as you shuffle through the crowd. Soon you see the Imperial Customs office ahead. You burst into the main room where Mistress Crimson is still being interrogated at the front desk. "Help me!" you cry, "Someone help me. There's a deranged Rodian back there with a blaster, and he's shooting at everybody. I think he's taken some poor woman hostage." Almost as if on cue, the Rodian out in the corridor fires several blaster bolts into the air. Half the stormtroopers and customs officers run out to try and subdue the Rodian.

Mistress Crimson gives you a wide smile and nods toward one of the two stormtroopers guarding her while the Imperial Naval officer continues to batter her with questions. You're not quite certain what she means by that, but she distracts you again — just before you walk right into that particular stormtrooper!

"Watch where you're going," the stormtrooper orders. You back off and catch a glimpse of Mistress Crimson pulling her manacled hands away from the stormtrooper's utility belt — with the keys to open her restraining bands!

"Goodness gracious me," you exclaim. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. I should have been watching where I was going. Please accept the humble apologies of this terribly clumsy protocol droid. I am truly sorry ..." You seem to have distracted the stormtroopers long enough for Mistress Crimson to escape from the restraining bands. While everyone is watching you prattle on about apologies, Mistress Crimson grabs one of the stormtroopers' blasters and starts shooting up the customs office!

Humans. They're terribly irrational. You're not certain how you manage to put up with their heroic antics. One of these days it's going to get you blown to pieces. You should have expected Mistress Crimson to try a heroic escape rather than trying to sneak away with another diversion. She blasts the few guards left in the customs office, then grabs you by the hand and drags you out into the starport corridor, heading for her ship.

You're almost to the *Starlight Red's* docking bay when you see the blast doors at the bay's entrance have been sealed! Mistress Crimson punches her finger at the door controls, but the blast doors are locked. "Uthre, can you open the blast doors from here?" she asks.

You look around and find a nearby starport information computer station. You shuffle over and see if you can override whatever computer program is keeping the blast doors shut.

You successfully reprogram the computer and the blast doors open. You and Mistress Crimson rush into the docking bay just as a squad of stormtroopers rounds the bend and begins firing at you. Mistress Crimson runs up into the *Starlight Red's* cockpit while you shuffle up the entry ramp, closing it behind you. Before you even have a chance to strap yourself in, the *Starlight Red* blasts out of the docking bay and streaks out from starport tower 214. You've done it! You've saved Mistress Crimson and escaped from Byblos!

Hoth is an isolated world distant from its blue-white sun, the sixth planet in the system. Tactically insignificant, unnoticed by the Imperial Navy. A perfect hiding place for a Rebel base.

Near the planet is a broad and hazardous asteroid belt, making hyperspace passage through the area extremely difficult; even travel at sublight speeds is risky for all but the most skilled pilots. Due to scattered debris from the asteroid belt, the planet Hoth itself has high meteor activity, thereby camouflaging our routine activities. All of which are great advantages, as far as the Alliance is concerned.

Hoth is far from a soft assignment, though. Daylight temperatures average only -32°C even in the temperate zone near the planetary equator. At night, temperatures can plunge another twenty to thirty degrees, made worse by high-velocity winds tearing across the tundra. Few life-forms can survive in this environment, and those that do survive are not...pleasant.

After the destruction of our secret Rebel base on the fourth moon of Yavin, the entire Alliance scrambled to find alternative locations. I had collected a great deal of direct and anecdotal information during my years on tramp space freighters before hooking up with the Rebel Alliance. I offered my own suggestions, particularly emphasizing Hoth. The ice planet seemed a terrible option, a horrendously difficult place to establish living quarters...but it was also a place where the Empire would never suspect us. That was more important than our personal comfort. Besides, we could always wear thermal mittens and bring extra blankets.

Instead of marching in and converting the surface of the planet to our own needs, as the Empire would have done, we tried to work with the environment of a world not considered habitable by humanoid life-forms. Instead of shipping huge cargoes of supplies and prefab structures, my Corps of Engineers used the natural resources of Hoth to establish Echo Base. It was a good military tactic, efficient and leaving few traces on the surface.

Initially, we had sent a reconnaissance and survey team in a rapid low-orbital mapping expedition, scouting possible locations for a new base. Particularly close to the northern edge of the temperate zone, we found many places where volcanic and seismic activity had cracked the thick ice sheath, breaking vast networks of caverns in the ice. As soon as I saw these images, I knew these ice caves would prove ideal



and adaptable for our purposes.

While the rest of the Rebel fleet made their way to the Hoth system through convoluted hyperspace paths to elude any possible pursuit, my surveyors mapped the ice labyrinths. For completeness, because I do not like surprises, they probed much deeper than what eventually became the main complex of Echo Base. The surveyors traveled far underground, where the distant sunlight barely managed to penetrate through the thick ice, leaving only a dim rainbowlike glow.

My scouts found solid rock inclusions and deep lava tubes where volcanic steam rose up to freeze against the cave walls in fantastic trees of sulfur-and-ice stalactites that hung down from the ceilings. While we did tap into some of these heat sinks as power sources, I considered the deep lava tubes too far beneath the ice to serve adequately as a

supply and command base. Besides, the possibility of being trapped underground in an Imperial attack made me decidedly uneasy.

The first major part of the work of constructing Echo Base involved expansion of the natural ice caves. My Corps of Engineers worked day and night, using excavator machinery and laser cutters to blast larger grottoes and to install connections between chambers. Power conduits and communications tubes ran along the walls, mounted directly onto the smooth ice and solidly packed snow. It wasn't elegant or pretty, but it worked. We opened up Echo Base in record time.

Initially, our equipment could not withstand the cold. Comm units failed frequently, forcing my engineers to rely on old-fashioned messengers—non-combat-trained personnel who ran with white breath puffing from one corridor to another. Some of the lesser functionaries and diplomatic runners in exile carried recordings back and forth from deep tunnel excavations to the upper command centers, processing supply requisitions from our matériel ships, requesting design and computer assistance from other specialists in the Alliance fleet.

Large chambers in the ice caves served as main equipment rooms and hangar bays, while some of the largest items of machinery—the enormous shield generator, for instance—were located outside under thick layers of insulation to protect their fragile components from the deep cold.

By the time we opened Echo Base, we had completed the quarters and accommodations for several thousand people, including the government-in-exile of the Rebel Alliance. Representatives from the Civil and Military Government and top military advisers as well as high-level civil servants and their assistants learned to cope with the miserable conditions.

Because the structural material was solid ice, we were forced to maintain Echo Base at freezing temperatures. The walls of the living quarters were coated with an insulating plastic, which allowed the rooms to be heated to a comfortable temperature. However, several mishaps did occur when well-

meaning droids (hearing people grumble about the cold) increased the temperature in certain rooms, causing drastic meltdowns.

Base personnel adapted to the chill by wearing flexible insulating uniforms and comfortable standard-issue thermal suits. Some of the more temperature-sensitive inhabitants of the base found it more comfortable to remain living in their cramped—but heated—quarters inside the transport vessels parked inside the huge hangar grotto.

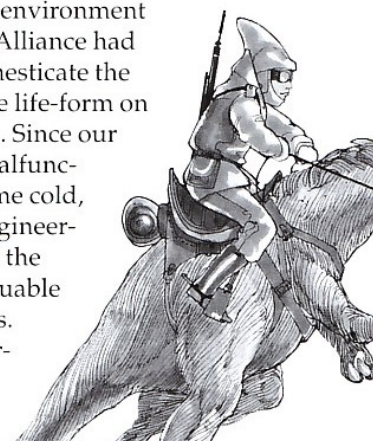
We did our best with the few amenities on hand; but life during wartime is hard, and no one who signed on expected a relaxing vacation.

Nevertheless, people under fire are quite resourceful in finding ways to amuse themselves, even under strict alert conditions. For example, frequent meteor impacts have blasted circular craters in the surface ice sheets; at the floor of each crater the melted water has flash-frozen into a mirror-smooth lake. During their off-shifts base personnel supply their own recreation and exercise by ice-skating on these natural rinks.

Also, ostensibly as part of their training, new Rebel scouts put together a bizarre “tauntaun rodeo” out on the snowfields, riding the smelly, uncooperative beasts in various stunt activities.

Adapting to the environment at hand, the Rebel Alliance had found ways to domesticate the most common large life-form on Hoth, the tauntaun. Since our machinery often malfunctioned in the extreme cold, despite our best engineering fixes, we found the ornery beasts invaluable for certain activities.

The spitting, gurgling tauntauns are basically



reptilian, covered with an insulating gray-white fur that gives them the nickname "snow lizards." Their body temperature is low, and some of the Alliance exobiologists have remarked that they seem to have antifreeze for blood. They have evolved into several different species to adapt to the smallest habitable niches in the frozen wastelands.

Their cold-resistant blood allows them to survive extremely low temperatures; however, this is at the cost of shutting down many of their bodily organs. Forcing a tauntaun to perform arduous tasks in the deep cold frequently proves fatal.

Some species of wild tauntaun live on the surface, foraging across the tundra during the warmest periods of daylight, searching for edible lichens and moss on exposed outcroppings. Their strong, rough-textured lips are able to scour the hardy coatings of plant cells from the rocks. These tauntauns have splayed tridactyl feet and long claws to allow them purchase on the snow as they run. Their large hind legs make them powerful sprinters.

Beneath the insulating white-gray fur, the tough reptilian skin exudes oils and waste products from numerous tiny pores. This gives the tauntauns a distinctive and extremely unpleasant odor. I caught one of my engineers insulting a coworker by saying, "You smell like a tauntaun!" I considered that such a terrible insult that I gave him outside perimeter inspection duty for a week.

Other breeds of tauntaun look more reptilian, with narrow bodies and longer forelimbs. These types are usually denizens of the deep ice caves. They live near subterranean volcanic vents and forage among the species of foul-tasting fungus that grow in the lightless chambers.

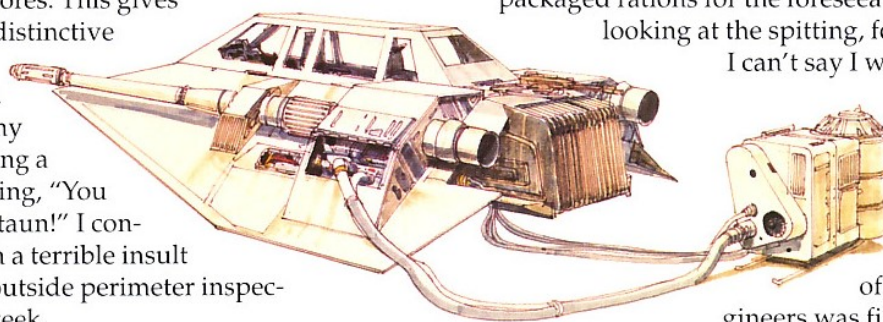
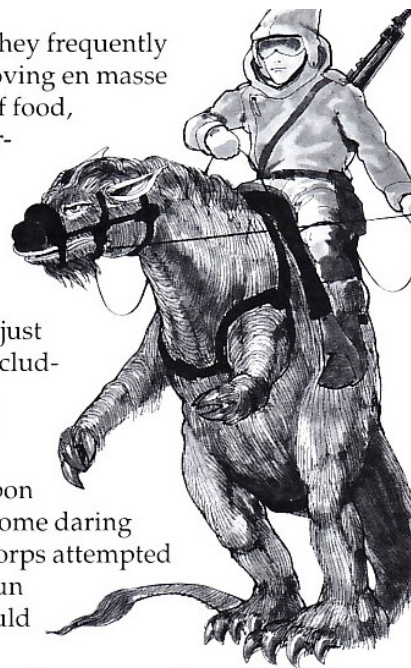
While rounding up captive tauntauns to tame and

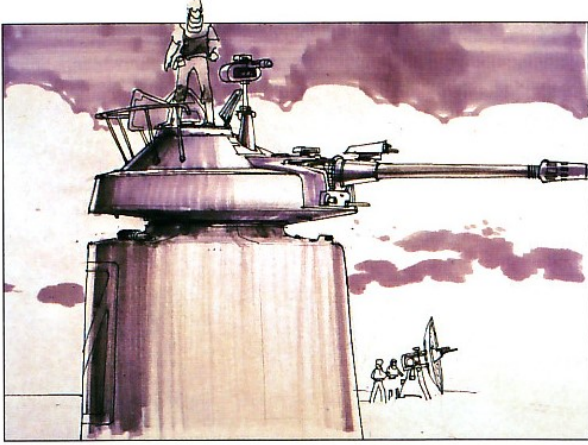
ride, we saw that they frequently travel in herds, moving en masse to seek any form of food, whether on the surface, in the rock outcroppings, or deep in the ice caves. From what we can tell, tauntauns will eat just about anything, including frozen carrion and small rodents they catch.

Immediately upon arriving at Hoth, some daring members of our Corps attempted to taste the tauntaun meat to see if it could become a dietary staple during our assignment on the frozen world. But they learned their lesson after only one taste. The meat was stringy, sulfurous, and practically indigestible. We would be eating pre-packaged rations for the foreseeable future—and, looking at the spitting, foul snow lizards, I can't say I was disappointed.

Once the base was open for habitation and the primary routine established, the job of my Corps of Engineers was finished. But since

I find sitting around on alert immensely tiresome, I was fidgeting with boredom after only a few days. I spoke to General Carlist Rieekan, the man in charge of Echo Base, and he gave me permission to continue exploring Hoth and to compile my report for possible further strategic use by the Rebel Alliance.





The stark, hostile landscape of Hoth may seem terrifying to many life-forms, but the frozen scenery has its own sort of beauty. It grows on you after a while, and I found the stark, bright *cleanness* to be refreshing after spending so much of my life in the Alliance in run-down, out-of-the-way bases or smelly spice freighters.

Once we happened to be outside just after one of the frequent, severe windstorms, right around local sunset. As the distant blue-white touched the horizon, the ice crystals that were whipped into the air from the storm created shimmering rainbows, painful to look at in the crackling cold air. The fading light refracted prismatically from great mounds of transparent ice, washing the landscape with brilliant colors. The temperature drops so rapidly at night, though, that few of the base personnel are willing to go out sight-seeing, even for a spectacle like this.

Another day, some of my people went with me to explore the flatlands north of Echo Base. As we had seen from the initial reconnaissance flights, underground springs near deep volcanic sources periodically flash into steam and spray through narrow channels toward the planet's surface. But we did not expect the weird landforms caused by this phenomenon.

When the steam strikes the subzero cold of Hoth's atmosphere, it freezes into delicate powder that slowly builds layer upon layer around the geysers' mouths. Over decades, these ice geysers build up fantastic castle-like formations, tall turrets and spiky frozen forests. The ice trees show a broad

palette of colors, yellows, tans, reds, blues, and greens. I'm no chemist, but I suppose the colors come from sulfur and other mineral impurities in the volcanic springs. When the wind picks up, tiny fragments of the fragile trees break off and tinkle to the ground. It's a strange, ethereal music.

Ice caps cover most of the deep oceans of Hoth, though tidal motions caused by Hoth's three moons (and large meteor impacts, too, I suppose) crack through the frozen shelves, releasing the trapped water to gush upward, jetting high and coating the glacial wound. The intense cold needs very little time to seal these breaches, returning Hoth to its motionless, frozen state. Still, the new ice is darker and smoother, and you can see it plainly even from a low-flying snowspeeder.

In one of our far-ranging expeditions to Hoth's southern hemisphere, we found a great chasm that stretches for nearly a thousand kilometers. I thought it looked as if the ice planet had started to split at the seams, but then had thought better of it. This huge canyon is filled with water barely above the freezing point, kept liquid by the immense pressure from both sides trying to slam back together.

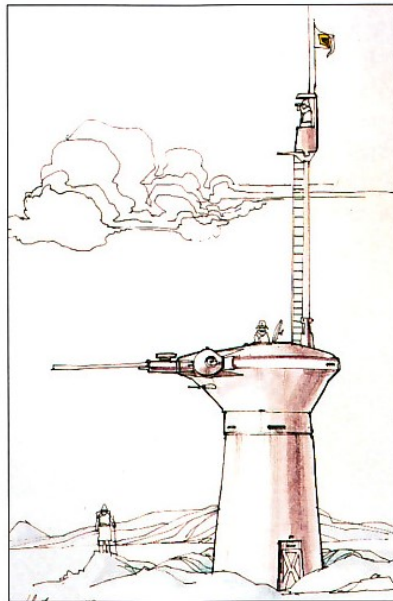
On the rims of the canyon, glaciers slump over the sides in a horrendous, slow-motion plunge. It

looks like a time-slowed image of a huge waterfall. The great walls of ice relentlessly move, less than a meter per year according to our measurements, as they press down and grind side channels down to the open, blackish water below.

The glaciers themselves are a deep blue, veined with swirling colors from primitive algae that manage to survive by leaching dissolved nutrients and minerals from the frozen water; they must metabolize it with the dim sunlight that penetrates the murky ice.

Even locked inside the glacial prison, the algae are not safe. Wire-like ice worms burrow their way through the frozen walls, feeding on the algae. The ice worms tunnel through the glaciers, leaving

honeycombed shafts along the outer surfaces of the ice, where the algae are most prevalent.



(top) Gun-emplacement crew equipped for the unforgiving cold.

(bottom) Though Hoth is a barren world, the Rebel Alliance never lets down its guard.

When the wind blows from the right direction, the tiny holes in the glaciers emit a flutelike music, rising and falling into the bleak emptiness in an eerie, lonesome melody.

The most fearsome and the deadliest inhabitants of Hoth are the wampa ice creatures. In fact, in my travels prior to joining the Rebel Alliance, any time I heard the name of Hoth spoken, these beasts were mentioned in the same shuddering breath. I thought that rumor had exaggerated their fear-someness—but even the hyperbole of lowlife traders could not overestimate the ferocity of these monsters.

Wampas are huge, standing three or four meters tall, with yellow eyes. They are covered with wiry white fur that allows them to roam the tundra of the ice planet even during storms, perfectly camouflaged.

The snow monsters have only a very faint scent that would alert their prey—unlike the filthy tauntauns. By the time a tauntaun can smell the wampa through its own stench, the monster is too close for the prey to escape. I suppose the lack of scent could be because the wampas keep themselves meticulously clean—but that's not likely considering the cluttered, bone-strewn lair we found.

Wampas are solitary creatures, each living in its own ice cavern. If the creatures cannot find an appropriate grotto for themselves, they are capable of ripping a new chamber from a wall of ice and snow with brute strength.

Luckily, wampas seem to be very rare. My guess would be that, because of their large size, wampas require a great deal of fresh meat. Since life is so sparse on Hoth, each wampa needs a vast and exclusive hunting domain. The creatures must spend days wandering across the tundra, covering more than a hundred kilometers in search of food. Again, this may be an exaggerated tall tale told in a cantina over too many drinks, but I have heard poachers tell how wampas guard their territory jealously, engaging in bloody duels to protect their hunting grounds, leaving splashes of red-stained snow across the desolation.

When a wampa attacks, its intent is to stun, not kill outright (although from the few souvenir/trophy claws I glimpsed, I would say that one swipe is probably enough to slaughter lesser animals). The wampa drags its victim across the tundra back to the lair; it then suspends the hapless being from the ceiling of the ice cavern until the wampa grows hungry.

Though the ice creatures appear to be violently solitary creatures, there is evidence that they do act as a concerted team at times. While we were out alone far from Echo Base on our own bivouac, we slept in small thermal shelters. As the night winds gusted across the snows, we could hear a deeper, more mournful howl overlapping the sounds of the breezes. We knew it had to be wampas crying out across the vastness—perhaps seeking mates, perhaps making complicated plans.

Because of their violence, the size of their claws and teeth, and the thickness of their pelt, wampas are legendary as targets for unscrupulous big-game hunters and thrillseekers—and this is how I had heard so much about them. In my travels I had seen occasional trophies on the black market: hides, stuffed heads, and claws that commanded astronomical prices. I can remember one rugged black-market poacher loudly offering shooting expeditions to Hoth for “the best hunt in the galaxy!”—although I don't know what he would have done had anyone taken him up on the offer.

I had heard of one other ill-fated illegal poaching operation, which I told to my companions as we shivered in our shelters—and believe me, that story was on all our minds as the wampas howled at each other in the frozen darkness.

A group of failed stormtrooper cadets had set up a business as guides to take the highest-paying big-game hunters to track down and kill wampas. The profits were high and, given sufficient weaponry, the game was not too difficult. But on the fourth such expedition, the wampas fought back.

By this time the ice creatures had learned their enemies' tactics and weaknesses. The wampas found the spaceships left by the group and tore them apart during the night, leaving the hunters and their guides with no comlink and no way to get off the frozen planet. The wampas raised their howling voices in the night, terrifying the hunters, and making them waste their ammunition by shooting at shadows. Idiots, of course. But then, these were *failed* stormtroopers.

The perfectly camouflaged snow monsters struck, attacking in unison—these supposedly solitary creatures acted together like a precision killing machine. They came seven nights in a row, and each night they took only one victim, dragging him out into the cold darkness. No amount of fighting could stop them, and even though several wampas were slain, the monsters kept coming until they grabbed their chosen human. The terrified hunters, seeing their numbers diminishing with each passing night, could do nothing.

Finally the last two survivors made a pact and turned their weapons on each other rather than become tortured victims of the wampas. Of course, as with many such tall tales, the question remains *who told the story*, if no one survived? But we could not be bothered by trifles like that as we heard the howling wampas in the distance.

All through that empty, cold night of bivouac, we posted two guards, edgy and ready to shoot at any movement outside. It was a very long night, and we were glad to get back to Echo Base, ready to spend our time in even the most tedious chores of maintaining our defenses.

Because of its inhospitable conditions, Hoth is a great place to hide, a perfect isolated base for the Rebel Alliance. But we did not allow ourselves to grow overconfident that the Empire would never be able to locate us. Though it may have seemed unnecessary, Base Commander Rieekan insisted on a full defensive posture at all times, with no exceptions.

The other Rebel soldiers in Echo Base considered him a grim man, but Rieekan had good cause to be jumpy, unwilling to ignore warning signs until it was too late. I knew his past, and I respected him for it. I don't know what I would have done in his place, but he had already made the mistake of waiting too long—and as a result his beautiful home of Alderaan had been destroyed by the Death Star.

He won't tell you the story, keeping his sorrow to himself, but I made sure every member of my Corps of Engineers knew it. I tolerated no grumbling about his "unreasonable" demands, or his hard-driving work schedules, or his seeming paranoia about being discovered and attacked.

A native of Alderaan and a secret member of the Rebel Alliance, Rieekan had been inspecting satellite transmitters around Delaya, a nearby sister world of Alderaan, when he saw the terrible Death Star approach his home planet. Through covert operations, the Alliance had already learned of the battle station being built by Grand Moff Tarkin, and so Rieekan knew what might occur when the Death Star approached Alderaan.

But he was also terrified that if he signaled a general evacuation of Alderaan, the Empire would know its security had been breached. Why else would the people of Alderaan flee at first sight of the secret battle station, unless a spy had brought knowledge from the Imperial think tanks? That would be tantamount to admitting Alderaan's ties to the Rebel Alliance, and Alderaan had always pleaded neutrality. Torn by indecision, Rieekan held off on the evacuation, hoping that Tarkin was only

bluffing, not wishing to blow his cover.

But Tarkin was not afraid to use his new weapon, and all the people on Alderaan were destroyed. General Rieekan still bears the guilt on his shoulders. He has vowed never again to hesitate, never again to let the Empire's cruelty surprise him. He insisted on the constant defensive posture of Echo Base, no matter how unlikely discovery might seem.

We assisted in modifying snowspeeder vehicles to function at peak performance in the worst cold of Hoth, though these modifications were difficult and took some time. When the snowspeeders were functioning properly, long-range scouts flew in a wide radius around Echo Base, ensuring the security of the site.

Various "Echo Stations" were placed around the planet to monitor meteor activity and search for any sign of an unwelcome visit from our friends in the Imperial Navy.

A powerful energy field protects Echo Base from a space attack. This shield is strong enough to deflect the heaviest Imperial bombardment from orbit. Echo Base's great ion cannon is the single most powerful artillery piece in the Alliance arsenal.

One thousand Special Forces troopers are specially trained for ground defense in the frigid environment. They are armed with numerous antivehicle and antipersonnel artillery pieces specially adapted to function at low temperatures. For greater versatility, some scouts ride the perimeter on tauntaun mounts during daylight hours.

Despite our full spectrum of defenses, we maintain our vigilance, waiting, always waiting, for the Empire to find us again.

Smuggler Activity Update

CORUSCANT NODE: We've been trying to keep track of all our usual smuggler friends, but with everything they've been up to, it hasn't been easy. This hasn't been a great year so far for those in the "independent transport" business, especially with Vader's Death Squadron lurking in the darker corners of the Outer Rim, but these enterprising smugglers still seem to make ends meet.

Tru'eb's been making a fortune running guns into Spirva sector, though with martial law imposed, the savvy Twi'lek will probably pocket his credits and find less dangerous markets to exploit. Tru'eb wasn't the only one to take advantage of lucrative markets making the "Spirva Run," as it's been dubbed. Bettie and Jaxa seemed to have worked things out long enough to cash in on the Spirva riots. To'ir and Liadden hauled a few loads of gladiator walkers until they got caught. They're probably headed for Rithgar's little shadowport near Kothlis for much-needed repairs on the *Seventy-Seven Stars*.

The Mon Calamari smuggler Basz Maliyu has blown the Outer Rim for the Colonies. Some suspect he's responsible for betraying the shadowport on Syvris the Empire assaulted last month. Others (mostly his friends) say he had nothing to do with the attack—it was sheer luck that Basz got out in time. Nobody's quite sure who he's working for in the Colonies.

Solo has all but disappeared from the scene. Short of a small incident involving some bounty hunters on Ord Mantell, nobody's seen Solo or his Wookiee sidekick, Chewbacca. We're wondering if he's still hanging around that fireball Alderaanian princess and some wide-eyed idealistic kid. Han's old buddy Calrissian hasn't made the headlines since his involvement in the Battle of Taanab nearly two years ago. The scoundrel's probably setting up some elaborate scam to swindle some poor idiot.

We ran into Platt rather unexpectedly at the premiere of the *Kallea Cycle* on Brentaal. It's amazing how many underworld notables managed to sneak in past security to enjoy the opera and the festivities surrounding the performance. We hear the Tombat even made his presence known. Platt wore a stunning gown, had her hair dyed to avoid the authorities, and had two very handsome escorts with her. As usual, Platt would neither confirm nor deny the rumor that she's a direct descendent of the Kallea who forged the Hydian Way.

Bryce-Kelley and Rypka made their annual sojourn to Ryloth. Problems with slavers, Twi'lek political intrigue and a few bad bargains for ryll aside, they had a pretty normal visit. They're still trying to make ends meet while running the unofficial smuggler's benevolence society. Wish them luck, because you know they'll need it.

Arakyd Probots Enter Wider Service

BYBLOS, CORPORATE TOWER 133: Arakyd Corp. representative Allion Vlenda unveiled a plan for the company's Viper probe droid series to be modified for additional military, corporate and civilian roles. "The Viper program has been extremely successful in Imperial naval operations," Vlenda said. "With the Empire's endorsement, Arakyd's Research and Development teams have pursued new probot designs for various applications."

"Arakyd's probots have performed admirably in the Navy," noted Admiral Baavil, commander of Imperial forces on Byblos, where the company has one of its major corporate facilities. "We anticipate the probot can master other duties currently performed by humans and obsolete droids." The Admiral would not point to anyone incident in Imperial service which characterized the probe droids' success, but called the probots "the most versatile and efficient droids currently serving the Empire."



Analysts speculate that the Imperial Navy has used Arakyd's Viper probots to scout out new or seemingly uninhabited worlds used by smugglers, fugitives and Rebels. The probe droids use a hyperspace pod to travel vast distances, increasing the range which a single Star Destroyer can thoroughly search. Admiral Baavil said more droids were needed to fill other roles within the Imperial military infrastructure. "Arakyd's Vipers are perfect for patrol duties near garrisons, temporary bases and prison facilities," he said. "They can help monitor starship traffic in busy fleet formations and perform valuable search-and-rescue missions."

Vlenda outlined the program to produce streamlined versions of the military probe droid model for commercial use. "We can replace much of the military-grade armament and programming with the commercial-grade equivalent," he said. "Probe droids have many valuable applications supplementing starport security and traffic control. They can analyze cargo, pursue criminal fugitives, and locate crashed spacecraft. We also plan to exploit the probot's value as a security droid." These streamlined versions of the Arakyd Viper—tentatively called the C-Viper series—would be more affordable for public operation.

Arakyd has already established a civilian sales division at its corporate facility on Byblos. This section will be responsible for finding new C-Viper markets and customers. Once operational prototypes are completed, sales associates will spread throughout the Colonies and other regions of the galaxy, demonstrating the C-Viper's capabilities.

In anticipation of massive production requirements, Arakyd has purchased a site on Kelada where plans are already underway to construct a new assembly factory. The plant will specialize in manufacturing C-Viper components and the droids themselves. "The factory on Kelada is a sign that Arakyd's success benefits the general public," Vlenda said. "Its construction and operation will provide much-needed jobs for the people of the Anarid Cluster."

ILLUSTRATED STAR WARS UNIVERSE: BESPIN

The gas giant Bespin is an isolated world renowned for its productive gas-mining facilities and its peaceful relaxation environment, as well as wildly extravagant gambling in the luxury resort levels of Cloud City, which is itself the most famous floating metropolis in the galaxy. Yes, Bespin is an untapped resource, one of the best-kept investment secrets in high-rolling financial circles—a world that has something for everyone.

The planet Bespin rotates rapidly, once every twelve hours, giving two full “days” and “nights” for every standard day. The cloud layers are 1,000 kilometers thick above a metal core buried deep within tumultuous outer layers of seething high-pressure liquid and denser gases reaching temperatures of some 6,000°C. This cauldron has brewed some of the most valuable chemicals and gases in the sector, and mining activities have so far barely touched the potential of this world’s wealth.

Bespin’s economy has branched out in two primary directions—industrialized gas mining to exploit the rich resources of the gas giant, and lavish tourism catering to the wealthy classes looking for a truly exotic holiday.

BESPIN’S INDUSTRIAL INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES—TAP INTO A FOUNTAIN OF WEALTH

As proof that this is no fluke, no fly-by-night mineral strike, the resources of Bespin have been quietly excavated for many years. Our history is a saga of foresight, daring, and extravagant riches.

The legendary Lord Ecclessis Figg, well-known Corellian explorer and investor, discovered a pleasant surprise on his inspection of supposedly unremarkable Bespin: Large concentrations of pure Tibanna gas lay in the upper atmosphere. Tibanna

gas has long been treasured as a hyperdrive coolant; no better substance has ever been found to serve this purpose, and thus it has been widely sought after by entrepreneurs in every sector.

Usually found in stellar chromospheres and deep in nebular cores, Tibanna gas has always proved difficult to extract from the source. Unlike other concentrations, Bespin’s Tibanna gas was—and is!—easily accessible. Further assays, which Figg conducted in strict secrecy, showed the clouds to be filled with extractable quantities of other valuable gaseous compounds as well, which were often flung into the upper atmospheric levels by deep storms.

Being a shrewd businessman, Figg saw his chance to become enormously rich—if he could pull his scheme off. With his flamboyant personality, Figg wooed and then married a lesser noble from the Royal House of Alderaan; she made her private fortune available to him and his eccentric pursuits. His previous ventures had been

marginally successful in various parts of the galaxy, but finally he paid her back ten times over with his fabulously successful gas mining facilities on Bespin.

A technical note: When it is excited by high frequencies, Tibanna gas produces intense packets of light that can be focused into destructive blaster beams. If compressed and “spin-sealed,” Tibanna gas produces four times the energy output of other competing gases for weapons production. Normally the spin-sealing process requires incredi-

On Bespin, marvelous air transportation systems are available for all of our valued tourists, regardless of body size or configuration.



ble energy, so few companies have tried it on a commercial scale—but Lord Figg also discovered that Tibanna gas from deep in Bespin is *naturally* spin-sealed. Thus, Bespin Tibanna gas is superior to all competitive products on the market.

Figg's first mining stations were simple automated containment vessels that descended into the thick clouds, filled themselves with atmospheric gases, then returned to processing ships in orbit. As with many first steps in a large operation, however, these nonselective mining stations proved very wasteful, since most of the captured gas was useless.

The next foothold established on Bespin occurred when Lord Figg erected the *Floating Home* mining colony, our first permanent settlement. As a gathering point, *Floating Home* launched the boom of fortune hunters trying to strike it rich mining the gas clouds—a boom that continues unabated to this day.

Riding the wind currents around the planet, numerous other airborne mining installations were constructed—floating automated refineries, storage tanks bobbing above the clouds, and skimmer facilities to scoop gases from different levels of Bespin's cloudbanks.

For the more volatile gases and other elements extracted from Bespin's atmosphere, stand-alone floating refineries dot the clouds. These refineries are carefully isolated, given special detection and motivation systems to keep their industrial odors and noises away from populated floating cities.

The skies of Bespin are large, giving plenty of room for everyone and every purpose.

In a major mining installation such as Cloud City, the Tibanna gas is drawn up through the central core, where it is pressurized, refined, encased in carbonite, and stored. With hyperspace shipping systems in place, the freshly mined gas is efficiently distributed across the galaxy.

Since Tibanna gas is also a crucial component in the phasing chambers of high-powered blasters and turbolasers, the Empire has restricted its distribution, but Cloud City business-creatures have found ways to work within the law to arrange distribution through alternative channels. While it has been suspected that much of the contraband Tibanna gas used to manufacture weaponry used by the Rebel Alliance comes from Bespin, no conclusive proof of this has ever been presented.

Unfortunately, due to the too-rapid industrial expansion at the beginning of Bespin's boom years, not all of the floating installations proved profitable. Hopeful investors overestimated the demand for certain gases, and prices fluctuated disastrously. Independent, self-sustaining operations ran into enormous expenditures just to keep the repulsorlifts operating for huge metal constructions. Unlike space stations in orbit, Bespin's floating cities hang free in the atmosphere, requiring great force literally to "keep themselves afloat."

When such facilities went bankrupt, their owners usually shut down the repulsorlift reactors and sent the entire construction plunging into the cloud depths below.

One drifting colossus was left hanging empty, though—a huge creaking ghost town in the sky, named Tibannopolis. The ruins of Tibannopolis, tilted at an angle, still hang above the roiling, dark clouds. The energy cores of the repulsorlift generators are slowly dwindling over the years, beginning to malfunction.

Because the people of Bespin are so hardworking and resourceful, the roof, decks, and sides of derelict



Tibannopolis have been picked over. The empty structure looks like a floating skeleton, with its buckled

plates and twisted support girders in a broad hemisphere and its dented ballast tanks slung below. Numerous antennae and weather vanes protrude from the joints.

The wreck of Tibannopolis is a popular place for sight-seeing, though. Daredevils frequently go there, as if they consider it the neighborhood "haunted house." On a warmer note, the empty city is also a spot frequently used by young lovers for secret trysts—what it lacks in luxury, it makes up for in privacy!

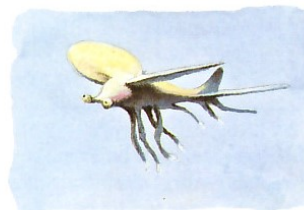


With only air and mist and clouds, and its only surface deep, deep below and at immense pressures, Bespin might not seem a likely place for a broad ecology. But life is wonderful and tenacious across the galaxy, and this planet is no exception.

Rudimentary floating life—from microscopic algae clusters to huge balloonlike beldons—thrives in the temperate atmospheric levels, metabolizing the sunlight, breathable gases, water vapor, and concentrations of other nutrients. Some of the galaxy's most prominent exozoologists have come to study the creatures of Bespin, and tourists marvel at their color and their beauty.

Self-contained plankton bubbles drift about in clumps, beside wispy concentrations of algae. The algae nodules

form around ice crystals and water droplets in the clouds. The algae clusters eventually fill with air pockets, causing the greenish mass to settle at an atmospheric level where their pressure is equalized. One species of floating algae, "pinks," is so plentiful that the clouds of Bespin have a distinctive rosy tinge.



Another species of algae, "glowers," inhabits the deeper cloud layers. On the night side of the planet, a purplish glow can be seen. Wind currents and convection bring wisps of mist teeming with glower-algae, causing the night sky below to look like a bizarre luminous landscape. Often at night the people of Cloud City sit out and watch from the upper decks or the lower observation lounges to see the eerie, swirling purplish clouds, backlit by occasional flashes of lightning buried under the thick mists. It is a breathtaking sight.

Lovers of flying creatures will enjoy observing the leathery,



batlike scavengers, called rawwks, that inhabit many of the floating structures, especially the abandoned ruins of Tibannopolis. Flocks of rawwks cluster in open girders, nesting and reproducing. Every day they fly in great waves down to feast on floating algae beds.

In the high-pressure levels of the atmosphere, much like the deep-sea lifeforms on ocean worlds, are extremely bizarre uncataloged creatures, as well as the enormous floating animals called beldons.



Beldons are giant balloonlike gas bags that metabolize the natural chemicals at the slushy gas-liquid-solid interface far down in Bespin's atmosphere.

Beldons occasionally rise high enough to be observed in the temperate levels of the atmosphere. Anecdotal accounts from solitary gas prospectors and station managers on isolated gas refineries tell of seeing huge beldons like giant sails floating above colonies of algae, dipping down with their numerous hair-thin tentacles to feed. The most frequent sightings occur at Bespin's poles.

Beldons may be long-lived, and they may be herd animals. Only one specimen has been studied closely, found floating dead after apparently being burst apart in a lightning storm. But the carcass was so huge it could not be hauled anywhere for storage much less a thorough dissection.

It has been postulated, with a great deal of enthusiasm and only circumstantial evidence, that beldons possibly give off Tibanna gas as an exhalation product.



For this reason, the Ruling Council of Cloud City has wisely forbidden hunting beldons, lest they destroy the creatures responsible for the precious substance on which so much of our economy depends. However, tourists are welcome to take advantage of the numerous chartered expeditions that will take cloud cars through a beldon herd, if one happens to be floating high and near enough to Cloud City.

Beldons are surrounded by a small electric field, which they use to detect the approach of intruders. This electric field helps them avoid ships, approaching storms, and natural predators. When clustered together as a herd, the beldons' electrical "sensor net" can extend for hundreds of kilometers, occasionally going so far as to interfere with vehicular traffic in the area.

Beldons move about by pumping exhaust gases, self-generated electric fields, or they just drift about on the winds. Their only defense against the predators of Bespin—such as packs of flying velkers—is their massive size. Even so, one beldon will sacrifice itself to allow the rest of the herd to escape.

Velkers are V-shaped natural killers, with tough claws and armored wings evolved to tear and disable the tough outer skins of beldons. Velkers hunt in packs because it takes a large group to rip apart their enormous prey. When killing a beldon, the velkers swarm onto its outer skin and begin to systematically shred it with meter-long claws, chewing the beldon flesh with rows of mouths that line their bellies.

Once a beldon's hide is breached, it begins leaking the gas that keeps it aloft, and slowly it sinks to lower levels. The velkers continue feasting for days until the beldon descends deep enough that the velkers fly off in search of other prey. The beldon victim eventually crashes into the liquid-gas interface layer far below.

Velkers can attain remarkable speeds in flight, soaring to extremely high altitudes. The flying predators have an electrical field surrounding their bodies as well, creating discharges that can damage passing cloud cars as well as beldons. Velkers seem to thrive on energy discharges from the great storms; it may be that they reproduce during such enormous electrical disturbances.

Velkers will attack small ships that approach them too closely. A large pack of velkers has even

The silent mysterious thranta riders (above and left) often paint themselves with amazing skin patterns. Only a few lucky tourists ever catch a glimpse of their tantalizing culture.

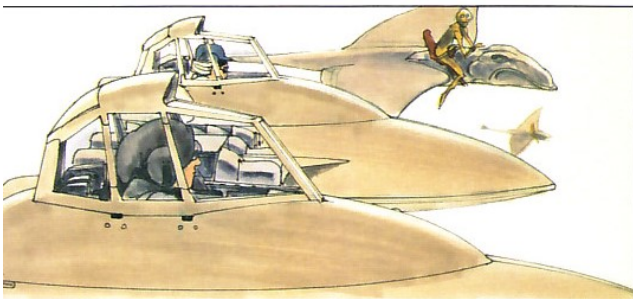
attacked Cloud City itself, as if mistaking the giant floating metropolis for a strange beldon. However, these incidents are rare, and usually cause no damage.

Some of our most interesting creatures, though, are not native to Bespin. A small herd of the flyers known as thrantas was transplanted from their world of Alderaan as possible beasts of burden to be used here among the clouds. Thrantas are floating beasts with broad, saillike wings and body cores composed mostly of a lighter-than-air bladder. After the destruction of Alderaan, Bespin's small herd of thrantas comprises the only surviving representatives of their magnificent species.

The Alderaanian thrantas were brought to Bespin with alien riders and wranglers. The riders perform a monthly "sky rodeo" of breathtaking feats, in which the talented alien riders leap out into the open sky, falling and falling until the thrantas swoop down to the rescue. The sky wranglers ask for volunteers from the audience, but they rarely have any takers.

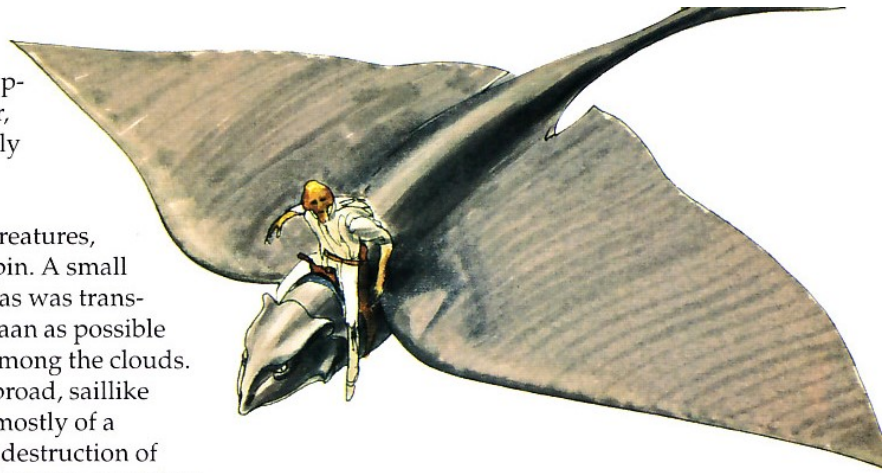
CLOUD CITY—THE SILVER LINING OF BESPIN'S CLOUDS

Cloud City, one of the marvels of the galaxy, is a place to invest, to relax, to entertain... it is like nothing you have ever seen before.



This glamorous and beautiful metropolis is located at the planet's equator in a "temperate" band thirty kilometers deep. The atmospheric pressure and temperature are pleasant to human life, allowing Cloud City to dispense with expensive closed environments and sophisticated life-support systems.

The entire floating metropolis is over sixteen kilometers in diameter, seventeen kilometers from the top of Kerros Tower to the bottom of the reactor stalk hanging far below. Through the core of the city runs a vast hollow wind tunnel. Side tunnels, called



One of Bespin's greatest spectacles is the great sky rodeo, where talented thranta riders perform amazing acrobatic feats accompanied by cloud-car stunt flyers.

airways, bleed out of the wind tunnel to the surface, to dispel pressure differentials. Hatches open and close as winds caress the outside of Cloud City. Inside the wind tunnel, large rudderlike stabilizers direct the flow of air up and down, to keep the city level and stable even in gusting winds.

Cloud City is safe even during occasional heavy weather. The tall buildings on the upper surface of Cloud City are designed to be flexible and adaptable, to sway with Bespin's changing winds. Sophisticated weather-watching systems and dispersed satellite buoys have been deployed at various points in the atmosphere to provide an early warning of Bespin's occasional large storms, but most of the time the environment is idyllic and pleasant.

The upper surface of Cloud City displays many landing platforms, towers, and spires. In honor of Ecclessis Figg's wife, most of the city's architecture is based on Alderaan styles—polished white synthetic stone, high ceilings, parklike recreation areas, gently curving corridors. Consistent, soothing decorations with geometric designs and lines run throughout. Plazas and open areas give the impression of empty space and freedom even in a densely packed metropolis.

The popular upper levels of Cloud City contain hotels, spas, casinos, clubs, and museums (mostly describing the triumphs of Figg & Associates and their historic mining operations). Restaurants cater to their clientele's varied tastes and biochemistries, from human to Wookiee, Ithorian, Ugnaught, Twi'lek, and other cuisines.

The upper levels are also jammed with casinos and clubs, for which Cloud City is well known. To

ensure fairness in all of Cloud City's games, the Gambling Authority conducts frequent surprise inspections to flush out dirty dealings and occasional underworld interest. Cloud City prides itself on running clean games. The Gambling Authority also imposes taxes on winnings (10 percent of house winnings, 7 percent of personal winnings), which is fed back into the city's infrastructure and maintenance to make Cloud City a clean and beautiful place to live or visit.

The next levels contain merchant quarters and expensive housing for high-level bureaucrats. Below that are administrative offices. The Merchants' Guild boasts 100,000 members, sellers of tourist items, luxuries, foodstuffs, contraband alcohol, gems, and other trinkets.

More economical real estate extends toward the core. Levels 121 through 160 are the low-rent areas, collectively called Port Town. Port Town is the home of many unlicensed casinos and gambling establishments—cantinas—hidden among the industrial loading docks. Port Town has gained its own sort of fame as home to all manner of smugglers, bounty hunters, and information merchants.

Sadly, these unlicensed Port Town casinos frequently prey on desperate people, those unfortunates who have bribed or smuggled their way onto ships bound for Bespin, trying to parlay their meager possessions into enough money to survive. Despite many significant social welfare projects, the Cloud City Ruling Council is at a loss for a solution to this problem.

The bottommost levels of Cloud City are devoted to the service sector, factories, gas processing plants, and mining quarters, as well as the tractor beam and repulsorlift generators.

Carbon-freezing chambers are used to lock volatile Tibanna gas into transportable chunks, the best way to transport the dangerous, high-energy spin-sealed material. An object is flash-frozen and then encased in carbonite, which holds the inner temperature constant, as if in stasis. Precious carbonite, which has a variable thermal conductivity, is mined from other systems—particularly the thick outer rings of a gas-giant in the Empress Teta system.

The citizenry of Cloud City consists of humans, droids, and aliens of all species and descriptions.

Certain factions in the city government disagree over major issues, such as whether to support the Empire or the Rebel Alliance in the growing political turmoil—though all branches are unified in their interest in keeping the Tibanna gas mining operation at a low profile to maintain our privacy and productivity. Publicly, Cloud City has declared itself neutral in the matter of the Rebellion, hoping to avoid Imperial peacekeeping forces. Our neutrality declaration also reassures tourists of safety when they travel to Bespin.

Three official branches of government exist in Cloud City—the Baron Administrator, the Exex, and the Parliament of Guilds. The post of the Baron Administrator, in a tradition established by Ecclessis Figg himself on his deathbed, is filled by appoint-

ment of the outgoing Administrator (or, failing that, a majority vote of the Exex). This has led to a wide variety of skill levels among those who have held the position, from inept, to corrupt, to master leaders.

The position of Baron Administrator has been bought, gambled away, or earned through blackmail, intimidation, and even assassination. Lando Calrissian himself became Cloud City's Baron Administrator when he won the position in an incredibly high-stakes game of sabacc.

The Exex are Cloud City's distinguished executive class, who perform the rigorous and ever-increasing paperwork duties without which no great metropolis could function. The Exex are a bureaucratic aristocracy formed from the managers of the original Figg & Associates gas mining operations. Their jobs are handed down from generation to generation, further fostering the impression of a nobility.

The overriding concern of the Exex—as of politicians everywhere—is to maintain the status quo and to minimize drastic changes for the citizenry. The Exex spend much of their time and energy hosting grueling diplomatic receptions, raffling off free cloud cruises to important officials in all governments on all planets. Exex often make highly effective use of small black messenger droids, motorized boxes that seek out a certain person to deliver important messages.

The third branch of government, the Parliament of Guilds, represents the workers and craftsmen in Cloud City. Delegates from the various guilds throughout the enormous city comprise the parliament, often haggling over new terms and rights among the working people.

UGNAUGHTS—AN EFFICIENT AND ENTHUSIASTIC WORKFORCE READY TO SERVE YOUR NEEDS

Small, hardworking, and loyal, the pug-faced Ugnaughts were the primary constructors of Cloud City. Ugnaughts are renowned for their mining ability, and Lord Ecclessis Figg used them to great effect in his various operations, which was one of the keys to his legendary success.

The Ugnaughts' stocky, compact bodies are efficient energy converters. They can withstand long periods of discomfort. Their original homeworld is long forgotten by them—they were taken away as slaves and dispersed many centuries ago. In this dark time, entire groups of Ugnaughts were sold or leased as "tribes" to large corporations for work on hellish worlds.

The benevolent Lord Figg, however, made an enormous investment to exploit his discovery of Tibanna gas—he bought three entire Ugnaught tribes and gave them a huge task and a huge incentive to do it: If they would build his Cloud City, he would grant the Ugnaughts their freedom and a place to live. The little creatures succeeded admirably, and Lord Figg kept his word.

Currently the free Ugnaughts have a lower level of the city to themselves, living in a burrow network, enclosed tunnels with dim reddish light and high humidity. They have also established access tunnels through all portions of the city, with completely concealed access hatches. The network is a veritable labyrinth of conduits, but even so, it still makes the Ugnaughts comfortable.

The Ugnaughts also have a rich oral tradition, keeping alive stories about other worlds on which they have served as slave workers. They have their own ruling councils, their own apprenticeship traditions, even representatives among the ruling councils in Cloud City. They have never forgotten Lord Figg for granting them their freedom.

Ugnaughts are fast-breeding, with a high proportion of females to males—all of whom are hardworking, providing a reliable and available workforce immediately on hand and at the proper location for those wishing to open a business in the city.

RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES—A PLACE TO PLAY, A PLACE TO RELAX

Though Cloud City was established primarily as a great gas mining installation, it grew and gained fame as a resort and vacation spot for the rich. Now the luxury accommodations on Cloud City can be enjoyed by all sentient beings, on any budget.

Some alternative health schemes have extolled the air of Beshpin for its therapeutic qualities. The wind has a bitter chemical tang from trace gases wafting to higher altitudes. Doctors still take dozens of patients out on circular platforms under floating parasols, flying into the mists of high-rising clouds. The patients lie prone on the smooth deck, wearing only wispy sheetlike wraps, while the barge pilot flies through the chemical haze. The effectiveness of this treatment has not been clinically proved, but many visitors to Beshpin are lavish in their praise of the technique.

Even while his mining operations were proving such a success, Ecclessis Figg saw an enormous opportunity to increase the offsystem money available to capitalize his investment. He remodeled and promoted Cloud City as a wondrous vacation spot, with live shows, entertainment, gambling, and gourmet dining for all species. Much like the gas mining operations themselves, this idea proved successful beyond Figg's wildest dreams. Beshpin's new flood of tourists was welcomed, and they continue to be pampered by the citizens and workers of Cloud City.

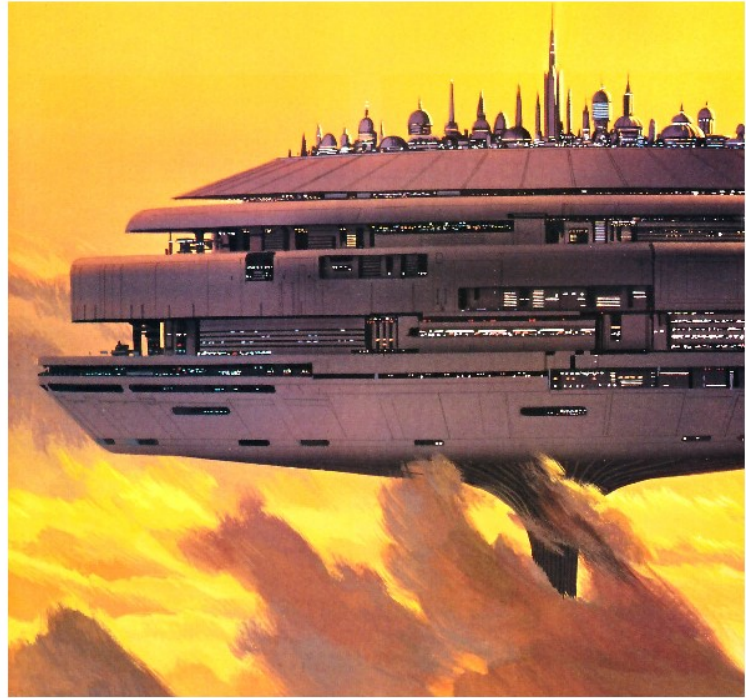
The city offers several dozen hotels, from the high-class Yarith Beshpin atop the upper plaza to the moderately priced Holiday Towers and the budget-priced Stratosphere located in the lower tourist levels.

With Beshpin's twelve-hour rotation cycle, vacationers get a full two days and nights of fun for every standard day, letting them enjoy the nightlife without missing out on sleep patterns. Tourists pay no attention to the clock, while the other inhabitants of Cloud City, such as the Ugnaughts, humans, and other species, work their own diurnal schedules.

Other than the popular casinos, for evening entertainment tourists can enjoy traditional platform danc-

ing on raised stages, or riskier wind dancing. Platform dancers, or simple music appreciators, can go from small synthtone lounges to more frenetic laser-pulse dance arenas. Wind dancers climb the high towers, strap on floater packs as life jackets...and then they dance, flinging themselves into the updrafts and swirling breezes that eddy like small cyclones around the top of Cloud City. The best time for dancing is at dawn or sunset, when shifting atmospheric temperatures cause the most spectacular gusts.

During the day, cruise captains take tourist groups out on large launch platforms, treating the vacationers to daylong expeditions among the clouds, to see the transient sights and the bizarre life-forms. Tour captains usually keep a protocol droid as an assistant for translating any number of known languages. The tourists are thrilled to see the floating gas refinery complexes, the ruins of Tibannopolis, and the deep gullet of knotted storm systems in the clouds below. Bespin is full of things to see and do.



Whether for investment in industries with extremely high growth potential, or important scientific studies on the natural wonders of life in the clouds. . .or simply to relax and unwind in the gentle winds, take advantage of Cloud City's numerous recreational opportunities—Bespin is the place to be.

Get carried away on the winds!

Governor Maclain Under Investigation

BRENTAAL, CORMOND: After his tremendous personal gains in last month's record economic trading, Brentaal's Governor Jerrod Maclain has come under the scrutiny of several Grand Moffs. Two of the Governor's aides and numerous, high-level bureaucrats from nearby systems have accused Maclain of behavior unsuitable for an Imperial diplomat.

The Governor is suspected of underhanded dealings in the Brentaal commerce exchange. The accusations surfaced after five commerce officers from the Dajjal Family were arrested last week for breach of market confidentiality. They claim they passed important speculative data about the Brentaal exchange to the Governor in return for political favors and monetary incentives. Although no solid proof has been uncovered, Imperial officials are wasting no time looking into the allegations.

Upon hearing news of this scandal, Emperor Palpatine himself assigned Grand Moff Rufaan Tigellinus to head the investigation. Imperial Court observers were stunned to hear such a prominent player in court politics—and a member of the exclusive Order of the Cantled Circle—had been relegated to the duties of a criminal investigator. "The Emperor's choice in this matter is final," announced Imperial Advisor and newsnet liaison Alec Pradeux. "In choosing Tigellinus to lead the inquest, the Emperor acknowledges the severity of this matter. Such impropriety in an Imperial official, if the accusations are true, deserves the most intense examination."

Some analysts speculate that Maclain's good economic fortune was part of an elaborate scheme to divert credits to pay off criminal elements. Rumors abound that the Governor has already used some of his new-found wealth to help agents of the Rebel Alliance operating within the Core Worlds.

"Governor Maclain has served the Empire loyally," Tigellinus said. "I am aware of several individuals who have been scheming to usurp Maclain's position. Whether or not there was any crime on the Governor's part and any role his rivals had in this affair remains to be seen. We will carry out a thorough investigation to discover if there was any wrongdoing and what the requisite punishment should be."

Grand Moff Tigellinus will be travelling immediately to Brentaal as soon as his staff is assembled. He also plans to interview several Imperial bureaucrats in Bormea and Darpa sectors. Tigellinus would make no announcement regarding how long his investigation would take.

Calrissian Resurfaces as Baron-Administrator

CORUSCANT NODE: Just when you thought he had disappeared from the Fringe, Lando Calrissian shows up where you'd least expect him. Cynabar sources confirm that Calrissian has somehow conned his way into the position of Baron-Administrator of Bespin's Cloud City.

Calrissian's last big show came at the Battle of Taanab nearly two years ago. Nobody really followed his activities since then. Rumors abound of minor scams and illicit operations here and there, but nothing so successful as to gain the gambler any notoriety beyond his already slick reputation.

The story surrounding Calrissian's appointment is still obscured by rumor. Apparently the Cloud City Exec and Parliament had been having trouble with Calrissian's predecessor, Baron Raynor. Since its construction, the Tibanna gas mining facility has had a succession of Administrators ranging from the businesslike to the criminal. Raynor was gifted with great corporate skills, but was also afflicted with vices which included greed and gambling. Rather than resorting to tedious political means or less savory methods, the Exec and Parliament supposedly set Baron Raynor up. Calrissian had been in Cloud City for several months, first touring the various casinos, then becoming a house gambler at one of the flashier establishments. Through the machinations of various political forces within Cloud City,

Lando challenged Baron Raynor to an all-or-nothing game of sabacc. Raynor wagered Cloud City, though it is unclear what kind of backing Calrissian had. Although the details on the game are still shrouded in mystery, Lando came out as the winner...and Cloud City's new Baron-Administrator.

Speculation continues to run rampant regarding the legitimate transfer of power. By right, the Baron-Administrator should be appointed by his predecessor, or by a joint vote of the Cloud City Exec and Parliament. Though those governing bodies did not give the entire gambling affair their official approval, they did nothing to stop it. Soon after the sabacc game, both groups gave Calrissian a confirmation vote indicating their satisfaction with the new Baron-Administrator. Some of those involved also indicated that the city's mysterious cyborged computer liaison officer had some influence in this twisted plot.

We weren't able to confirm exactly how long Calrissian has held the Baron-Administrator title, though he's been there long enough to turn Cloud City into a somewhat respectable, efficient enterprise again. If he can keep the local guilds from his throat, maintain the vast Tibanna gas mining machinery and avoid the notice of the Mining Guilds, Calrissian just might make this gamble pay off.

Double Cross on Ord Mantell

The polluted atmosphere of Ord Mantell casts strange hues across its surface as the sun sets on another dreary day. A black vessel slowly descends from the sky and lands in a dilapidated hangar bay. From the vessel, a Corellian transport, a walkway is lowered, and a lone figure disembarks. A small group of locals looks on, but one glimpse of the ominous being sends them scurrying. That's not an unusual reaction to Cypher Bos, a notorious bounty hunter. Indeed, the entire Nalrithian species of insectoids is generally feared throughout the galaxy.

Cypher strides through the streets of Ord Mantell, his mind focused on his destination. He parts the sparse foot traffic with his very presence. As he approaches a pair of Chadra-Fan, he can sense their fear. The bat-like beings exude a scent that echoes the terror on their faces. Cypher grins, obviously proud of his ability to inspire fear in others.

Cypher has come to speak with a Chadra-Fan named Baajik, a secret double agent for either the Rebels or the Hutts, whichever side serves his immediate needs. For now, at least, he's working for the Rebels. As the two scurry away, Cypher realizes that neither of them matches Baajik's description.

As Cypher turns off the main avenue onto a dark side street, he's being watched by a robed figure whose features are hidden under a heavy hood. The figure isn't tracking Cypher. He already knows that the Nalrithian is headed for the Drunken Bantha, the only place worth traveling this way for because it's the place to find out anything worth knowing on Ord Mantell.

With dusk quickly approaching, the robed figure has no trouble hiding from the Imperial stormtroopers who march past the alley. He waits for them to go by, then warily continues toward the Bantha. As any good Rebel knows, getting caught now would surely lead to his execution. After all, he is carrying stolen information about an Imperial shipment of credits. The Rebellion plans to intercept the shipment and use the funds to outfit its new secret base on Hoth.

Even so, the mysterious Rebel isn't nearly as concerned with the stormtroopers as he is with Cypher Bos. He's certain Cypher is here also seeking credits, though in the form of Imperial bounties on Rebel spies.

The Drunken Bantha is teeming with activity as a myriad of species chatter in many languages, putting another day of dread behind them. The robed figure spots Cypher, sitting in a dark, secluded corner, speaking to Baajik.

"What is this?" the cloaked Rebel hisses to himself, incredulous that he's being sold out by Baajik - - one of his own agents! The Rebel's hood falls away from his face enough to reveal his Nalrithian insectoid features.

There is a mental link shared by Nalrithian eggmates that allows them to think and act as a single entity. The link's range, though, is limited to no more than a dozen meters. For the last 20 minutes, Phoedris Bos - - the robed Rebel - - has managed to suppress the thought link between himself and his eggmate, Cypher Bos. But now the shock of Baajik's betrayal has broken Phoedris' concentration, and his one powerful thought - - "No! - - reverberates across the Drunken Bantha.

Of course, Cypher immediately detects the panicked presence of Phoedris and recognizes his eggmate's fear. He's sensed it twice before - - while hunting down their other two eggmates. Compared with Phoedris, however, they were rather poor game and not much of a challenge. Phoedris is more than clever enough to evade Cypher indefinitely, yet now his allegiance to the Rebellion has given away his whereabouts. Perhaps the two might have even teamed up, Cypher thinks, but then quickly reminds himself that bleeding-heart Phoedris would never have gone for that.

With less grace than usual, Phoedris pushes past the throng of pirates and smugglers. He tries to persuade himself that Cypher did not detect his mental outburst, knowing, though, that the chances are slim. Phoedris' outrage was so intense, it could have traveled a kilometer between eggmates.

Once outside, Phoedris is tempted to run, but catches himself, remembering the stormtrooper patrol. Rather, he backtracks several blocks, toward the Rebel hideout, nervously clutching his blaster... just in case.

Suddenly, a blaster shot beams from the shadows and catches Phoedris on the shoulder. If it were not for his flowing cloak, the shot would have landed in the center of his chest. The pain is still excruciating as Phoedris turns, expecting more fire. Instead, he is tackled and wrestled to the ground by his attacker - - Cypher. The air crackles with energy as the eggmates struggle, physically and mentally.

"I hope you understand, brother, that your death will serve a greater cause," Cypher shouts telepathically. "The Rebel dogs will never suspect that I have taken your place among them."

Both eggmates feel the pain of Phoedris' wound as they fight, but Cypher has planned well. "I have prepared for this with cybernetics," he tells his dying brother. "The wound is a mere tingle to me, while it bleeds you of your life."

The struggle is short. As Phoedris' lifeless body slides to the ground, Cypher unemotionally rips his eggmate's cloak free and fastens it around himself. He also possesses all of Phoedris' knowledge, skills and memories - - including the secret location of the Rebel hideout. Still, there is one element missing from his plan to single-handedly bring down the Rebellion as Cypher heads toward the hideout.

He noiselessly enters through a secret doorway into the heart of the Rebel Alliance's intelligence headquarters on Ord Mantell. His motions set off a humming sensor, alerting the two Rebels in the dimly lit room ahead. Not wanting to alarm them, Cypher quickly steps into the light and draws back his hood. "I have the information we need regarding the Imperial shipment," he says. "There should be more than enough credits onboard to pay for the Hoth base." With all of his eggmate's memories, Cypher continues to recite the details of the mission.

A moment later, the sensor hums again as Baajik enters the hideout. He immediately sees the Nalrithian, although he is not fooled by the mere change of clothing. His heightened senses tell him that this is not Phoedris before him. Baajik draws his blaster, but Cypher reacts and fires first, knocking the small bat creature backs into the darkness, where he falls into a smoldering heap. With his last gasp, Baajik whimpers, "Cypher Bos..."

"He must have mistaken me for my brother, Cypher Bos, the bounty hunter," the murderer says, laughing to himself as he continues his charade, and tries to look concerned. "But Cypher ambushed me on my way here. Fortunately, I blasted him and escaped."

Hunting the Hunters

Lord Darth Vader, By your directive, I have prepared a report on the elusive bounty hunter operating under the name of Nariss Siv Loqesh. He is difficult to work with - - even by the standards of other hunters - - but he is also very good at his job. As per your orders, Nariss has been ordered to join the bounty hunters Boba Fett, Bossk, IG-88, Dengar, 4-LOM and Zuckuss in the effort to track down the elusive Rebel outlaws Han Solo and Leia Organa. I'm sure his considerable skills will be of great utility.

I remain your faithful servant,

Major Herrit

Imperial Intelligence

Imperial Intelligence Datafile:

Nariss Siv Loqesh is a very successful hunter with a capture rate of nearly 90%. He has been operating as a licensed hunter for more than a decade, making for an unusually long career in that lethal profession.

There are no visual records of this individual's identity, due to unusual gaps in computer records. His insistence on operating in a full suit of body armor effectively conceals his identity. Tracking back through IOCI records, my agents have determined that this first bounty hunting permit was issued by a local agency on Sperin (Bajic sector). No further data are available.

Despite the mystery surrounding his origins, Loqesh's results are indisputable. He is an expert shot with a blaster. He tends to make excellent use of expeditors and informants to gather information. He has never worked directly for the Empire.

Although his current whereabouts are unknown, we will be contacting Nariss through an expeditor known as Crote. Crote was last seen on Garnib and is presumed to be on the planet.

* * *

It was a hot night, which hadn't helped Bie Breil'lya's mood much. The young Bothan was glad to be inside.

While rummaging through his picket for the room's palmcoder, Bie thought of all the horrible tortures he would like to inflict upon his first cousin, Tav, for sending him to this miserable world in the middle of summer. He hoped a cool glass of iced chi'ffa would be enough to cool him under his fur.

The only light in the darkened room was the flickering comm. Board. Bie let out a deep sigh as he flung his bag on the couch. He ordered the board to play the message while he reached for the light panel.

Blinking once, the vid display lit up to show a Twi'lek dressed in a hooded cloak. He fidgeted nervously; by the background noise Bie could tell the recording had been made from a public vid-comm. "Breil'lya, we must change our meeting. Tomorrow morning, 0500 hours, at the small cafù on the corner of. .."

Click!

Bie whirled at the unmistakable sound of a blaster safety being removed. The armored figure half hidden by shadow leveled a mean-looking pistol at Bie. "You are Bie Breil'lya, of the clan Alya."

Bie raised his hands, his fur rippling staccato-fashion to show his panic. "I can double the bounty you've been promised. My family's wealthy. I'll give you anything to let me go!"

"Indeed, you will."

Blue energy enveloped the Bothan.

* * *

Bie struggled back to consciousness. He had been propped up in a chair, his hands restrained by wristbinders. The brightly lit room smelled of servo lubricant and thruster exhaust. Like everywhere else on the planet, it was uncomfortably hot. As his vision cleared, he could see a black space yacht outside the hangar.

The drone of a misaligned power generator pounded in his ears... then he realized that the generator was fine and it was only his head that pounded. Beyond the throbbing headache, though, everything else seemed to be in working order.

"Ah, my furry Bothan friend is now awake."

Bie slowly tracked to the source of the noise, and then fought to concentrate on the figure standing before him. The stun blast's effects were still fairly strong. He didn't recognize the voice, but as he tracked up the figure, he realized that the familiar battle armor and blast helmet were off. A horribly scarred face stared back at him.

"If I was that ugly, I'd put the helmet back on." The alien's only response was to shift his weight from one leg to the other.

Summing up his courage, Bie stood - - teetered, actually - - trying to be as forceful as possible. He concentrated on controlling the nervous ripple of his fur... calming himself... exuding bravery and determination. "You'll never get away with this."

It sounded like he was saying, "Yool neber ged abway wid dees."

The alien smiled. "You don' t know how many times I've heard that. Now, be a good lad and cooperate, will you?"

With a quick shove, Bie was sent stumbling toward the ship. The alien leaned in close. "Breathing or not, you are worth the same. I would imagine you prefer breathing."

"Well, Nariss, I can see you captured your Bothan." The high-pitched but undeniably male voice carried over the hum of the power generators. A short humanoid figure slowly toddled into the hangar. He was a Bimm: essentially human in appearance, but barely a meter tall. This particular figure was dressed in a long black cloak - - unusual because most Bimms prefer brightly colored garments - - but he seemed to have that same insufferably cheery demeanor common to his people.

Nariss - - if that was his real name - - turned. "Once again, I am indebted to you, Crote. This time to the tune of 400 credits." Nariss pulled a small pouch from his belt and selected eight small plastic disks

"What do you want with this one, Nariss?" Crote asked as he pocketed the coins.

Nariss smiled - - a frightening image in of itself - - and patted Crote on the head.

"Sometimes it is best for an expediter not to know all the details, right? This one's worth a nice sum to a rather generous Hutt... and he's a tempting target for some of my competitors. He is excellent 'bait.'"

A muffled "Bayt?" emerged from the Bothan's mouth. Nariss glared at his bound victim. "I wasn't talking to you, my friend. Now, please be quiet. You're interrupting my concentration." Nariss' hand drifted down to rest on his blaster to complete the threat.

"As I was saying, he's bait. There are a few 'fellow professionals' I have a personal interest in. The bounty on this Bothan's head will tempt even them to come after him. And only then will they learn it was a trap set by me. I'm sure most of them forgot about me long ago."

The Bimm shook his head and chuckled. "A hunter who hunts hunters. Nariss, you are one of a kind. Before you drop this sorry piece of fur off, you've been commissioned by the Empire for a hunt. They want to reel in that spoiled Princess-turned-Rebel and - - get this - - Han Solo and the Wookiee."

"Solo. First Jabba, now the Empire. He has a talent for getting noticed. Who will he anger next, Vader?"

"Actually, Vader is after him. All of the top hunters are in-"

"It doesn't matter. I don't work for the Empire. I work for myself. My hunts. My way."

"But, Nariss... Fett, Bossk and Dengar are already in. If you want to be considered one of the best, you gotta go."

"I am the best, my little friend. If Fett wants to be an Imperial lapdog, that is his choice."

Crote shook his head. "You don't understand. You don't turn down someone like Vader."

Narliss looked Crote in the eye. He hated to endanger the Bimm. And he knew the Imperials would want to question Crote if they thought he knew something.

The little crook deserved better. He'd gotten Nariss out of more than a few scrapes over the years. "I need to finish this. You haven't seen me. You don't know where I am. If anyone asks - - especially the Empire - - tell them I disappeared without a trace. But don't worry. I'll be in touch."

* * *

Lord Darth Vader,

Despite firmly worded warnings, the hunter known as Nariss Siv Loqesh is apparently... declining... the invitation to join the hunt for Princess Leia Organa and Han Solo. According to Crote, his expediter, Nariss hasn't been seen for several weeks.

As per your standing directives, a "locate and detain" bounty for the crime of treason has been posted on this most ungrateful hunter. I have no doubt that the bounty of 25,000 credits will be sufficient to guarantee his capture... and to remind other hunters of exactly where their interests lie.

I remain your faithful servant,

Major Herrit

Imperial Intelligence

Kallea Cycle Tours Core Worlds, Colonies

BRENTAAL, VOTRAD: The company which performed the Kallea Cycle to massive audiences on Brentaal three months ago is taking the show on tour. The troupe will perform a special program featuring highlights from the marathon three-part operatic epic during week-long runs on Esseles, Corellia, Corulag, Kuat, Byblos and several other worlds throughout the Core and Colonies. The entire opera will be sung over three evenings on Coruscant, a performance which will no doubt be attended by the Emperor and the Imperial Court. The classic opera depicts the life of Freia Kallea, the legendary Brentaal explorer who single-handedly charted the Hydian Way hyperlane 3,000 years ago.

The Kallea troupe includes members of the prestigious Brentaal Hall Conservatory: the Conservatory Epic Orchestra and the Brentaal Illustrious Choir. The group has chartered the Sullustan cruise liner *Starlite Cloud* for transportation during the tour. Members of the cast, chorus and orchestra will be entertaining high-level dignitaries from throughout the Core Worlds and Colonies while they travel from system to system.

Kallea will be portrayed by Neile Janna, whose popular holo, *Kallea's Hope*, helped translate the opera into a popular format. Famed Chandrilan singer Gelod Vothran will reprise his role as Sival Brentioch, the prominent Hall Brentioch seneschal who financed Kallea's explorations and would eventually marry her. Mistress of the Hall Vessa Brentioch, who portrayed Kallea in the Brentaal performances, will not be accompanying the tour, as she is already committed to several business engagements with various noble trade houses on her homeworld.

The Kallea Tour is sponsored by Brentaal's Council of Human High Culture and two of that world's most prominent commerce houses, House Brentioch and Hall Jo'uda.

Shipping Corporations Post Rising Profits

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: Two of the galaxy's largest mass transport companies reported rising activity and increased profits. Ororo Transportation and Xizor Transport Systems both announced breakthroughs in earnings for the first half of the year. Economic analysts suspect the bolstered activity might be a direct result of the recent record-breaking upsurge in the Brentaal commodities exchange. Both corporations reported unprecedented numbers of new shipping contracts, with increased movement of bulk goods.

XTS newsmen liaison Egalla Rennta said her company was optimistic about the new economic life the increase has brought. "XTS has always maintained a solid foundation," she said. "Now we can continue to grow into new markets and greater diversification." Rennta indicated the extra capital will be used to construct a new fleet of container ships to expand service throughout the Outer Rim Territories. Investments will also improve current shipping routes and schedules along the company's established hyperlanes.

Ororo Transportation division head Adion Var'alich credited his corporation's success to its increased security measures on all its vessels. "Ororo has invested in protecting our shipments against smugglers, pirates and other criminal elements," Var'alich stated in an announcement from Ororo's corporate complex on Eredin. "We will continue to improve our current level of security and service to all our customers throughout the galaxy."

Analysts compute that Ororo's earnings were somewhat higher than XTS's, though the two transport corporations have been vying neck-in-neck for supremacy over the mass transport industry. The two corporations are known to be long-time rivals, though their adversarial relationship has rarely flared in overt violence. "Our friendly opposition is to be expected," XTS's Rennta said, "Especially in the commercially competitive society in which we co-exist." "The competition between our two companies can only foster better service and pricing for our customers," Ororo's Var'alich noted.

Carrier Assignment

General Straker entered the briefing room accompanied by a female officer identified by her rank pin as an Alliance captain. Straker stood, shifting his gaze from one member of the rebel group to the next, until each had been equally recognized by his somber examination. Finally, he seated himself, and a slight smile lifted his firm cheeks:

"My rebel comrades, it is my pleasure to tell you that you have proven yourselves to be capable individuals in Alliance service. It is capable people such as you that give this 'doomed' rebellion a fighting chance." The smile faded and Straker breathed deeply, then exhaled. "Unfortunately, the Imperial Navy is forcing more 'fighting chances' upon us than we can effectively engage in. And our casualties have been severe, particularly where pilots are concerned."

The general momentarily turned his attention to his companion. "This is Captain Lisha Randan. She commands the *Anatra Dora*, a light starfighter carrier. The *Dora* is carrying a full squadron of eight A-Wing fighters. But they lack sufficient pilots. I need you people to fulfill a temporary assignment as pilots aboard the *Dora* to carry out a strike mission. Like other similar operations, our intention is to force the Imperial Navy to further deplete its primary fleets by delegating more ships to system patrol and defense. In simpler terms - to take the heat off our boys. Most of the pilots already assigned to the *Dora* have received only limited training and lack experience. But some of you are highly skilled and experienced pilots. To you will fall the responsibility of leadership and continued training. You must board within the hour. I hope for your success, and may the Force be with you."

The group is assigned to the *Anatra Dora* as fighter pilots. Lacking supplies, including consumables, the *Dora* first jumps to the Duluth system. While in hyperspace, the players participate in pilot training and lectures. When they reach Duluth, the squadron practices actual maneuvers with the A-Wings, while stores are loaded from a secret cache. After the fighters are resecured, engineering trouble is discovered and must be repaired. It is a several hour job, so the players are invited to go see a unique geological site not far from the ship while the repairs are made.

After gazing down a large, bottomless pit from a naturally formed bridge, the group is attacked by mynocks. On the way back to the ship, Captain Randan asks them to check out a weak, nearby radio signal. It turns out to be an Imperial probot that was damaged when its pod malfunctioned during crash landing. The players either destroy it in blaster combat or it self-destructs.

The *Dora* now sets out for Bassadiir, the target system. Some time after arrival, sensors reveal that there are four Imperial freighters in orbit, and the squadron attacks. After six combat rounds, Captain Randan transmits an emergency recall. A picket ship has been detected further out-system, and a squadron of TIEs is closing on the *Dora*. The adventure is climaxed when the two squadrons clash, with the *Dora* right in the middle. When the TIEs are defeated, whatever remains of the A-Wings are brought aboard and the ship escapes with Imperials closing from two sides.

"BUT I'M NO FIGHTER PILOT!"

"I'm afraid we simply have to face facts. The Alliance lacks, among many things, sufficient skilled pilots - a fact that is causing a sharp increase in combat casualties. And, as I mentioned before, the *Dora* has a dual mission of training new pilots, which may include some of you. However, it should ease your mind to know that the *Dora's* operational orders are to attempt to avoid engaging combat craft."

As the *Dora* lacks sufficient food stores and the base where the players boarded lacks enough to restock from, the ship must first make a six-day jump to the Duluth system to resupply from a wilderness cache placed there by the Alliance. During the jump the squadron engages in classroom instruction, computer simulation, and briefing.

THE FIRST LECTURE

"If I can have your attention please, we'll begin. I am aware that most of you have flown only the Y-Wing fighter. But I'm sure everyone here has at least heard of this little A-Wing. Starting today, we will all become familiar with actually flying it.

"First, let's cover some basics. You'll be flying the fastest and most agile production starfighter there is. This baby will twist, spin, and slice through the void like nothing you've ever flown. You'll probably get an exhilarating notion that there's nothing it can't do. Get rid of that notion, because it could get you killed.

"Why? Because performance like this comes only from sacrificing somewhere else. We've all laughed at the joke that Imperial pilots fly 'solar eggshells'. Well, the A-Wing's hull is penetrated almost as easily. Never forget that. In fact, keep it in primary consideration.

"How? My advice to inexperienced pilots is to avoid closing to short range. Severe casualties are suffered by both sides when engaged in short range combat. When you are fired upon at anything less than long range, evade, evade, evade. Remember, staying at longer ranges will reduce the capacity of damage done to your fragile A-Wing when you do take hits.

As you may already realize, the advantages are yours. The A-Wing's lasers are an even match for a TIE's, but the A-Wing has impressively more accurate fire control computers. On top of that, the A-Wing has jammers that will foul your opponent's fire control systems. That about covers it, so bounce your craft around to your stomach's content - but unless you're a highly skilled pilot, avoid closing to short range."

The remainder of the six-day jump is filled with further lectures, combat simulation on computers, and performance analysis - in short, training.

FIRST STOP, DULUTH

At the end of six days, the *Dora* exits hyperspace far out-system from a giant, dim, orange-red sun. After scanning to be sure there is no in-system traffic, the ship begins its approach to a tiny "hard" planet, the only one in a system dominated by eleven distant gas giants.

It is to the innermost orbit that the ship heads for, to the red-tinged planet of Duluth I. As the *Dora* establishes a landing trajectory, it almost appears that the ship is going to hurtle past the small chunk of rock that is Duluth I and plummet right into the massive, red-glowing orb. But, within minutes, the ship is safely settled onto the rocky surface, only a short distance from the supply cache.

The cache contains food stores, various supplies and gear, and limited replacement parts for shipboard systems. From these the *Dora* will resupply. While the crew is doing so, Captain Randan agree (or will suggest) that the squadron should practice actual flight maneuvers in the A-Wings, as the ship will be planet-side for most of a day.

All activity outside outside the ship will require cold weather suits and some kind of life support gear.

SEEING THE SITES

When the stores are loaded and the A-Wings are resupplied in the bay, the ship begins lift-off procedures, but suddenly powers down. Captain Randan informs the crew that the engineers have detected energy fluctuations in the power core that indicate imminent malfunction. Engineering estimates four hours for the repair. The captain then tells the players that there is an interesting geological formation only an hour's journey in the landspeeder. The ship's navigator, Lt. Gowan, is familiar with it and could take them there if they'd like to see it.

After about an hour's speeding across rocky plains, the group arrives at a broad, rocky plateau and stops. Gowan leads them to a seemingly bottomless, cavernous maw nearly thirty meters across, and steps onto a natural rock bridge that overlooks the dark abyss.

"I've seen this pit several times, but each time, I feel these strange, eerie sensations travelling my spine. I can't help but wonder how deep it goes. And my mind conjures up hideous beasts lurking kilometers below. I don't know, maybe it's the spooky, shadowy orange light filtering down the rock. Or maybe it's just the old spacers' legends of giant space slugs I've heard tale of. But each time I stand above this gaping maw I half expect to see some giant monstrosity with ten meter, ship crunching fangs come shooting up to get me...but it hasn't happened yet."

At this very moment the group sees shadowed movement from within the pit. A dark mass is coming up out of the cavity! As it clears the opening it divides into half a dozen mynock, three of which wheel in the air and attack the group.

When the attacking mynock are dealt with, Lt. Gowan sheepishly mutters something about driving half a dozen mynock off the ship the last time it landed here. Well, anyway, that ought to be just about enough of this tourist attraction.

RETURN ENCOUNTER

Shortly after the group heads back, Captain Randan contacts them by radio: "We've detected a weak, garbled, repeating radio transmission. We can't make anything of it. It may be encoded. If it is, whatever is sending it probably isn't friendly. It's not far from your current position. I'd like you to check it out, then report your findings."

The captain provides the coordinates of the source, and the speeder arrives at the location within an hour, entering broken, rugged terrain. A small, metallic craft of some kind has crashed here, possibly an escape pod for an Imperial probot. The pod apparently malfunctioned, failing to engage breaking thrusters at the appropriate time to slow the pod prior to impact.

When the group approaches closer, they see a damaged probe droid laying in the wreck, about 40 meters away. One of its optical lenses is slowly pulsating a dim, yellow light. It is still transmitting a weak signal, but its hyperspace transmitter is apparently damaged or destroyed as it has not been triggered.

Captain Randan will be very interested to hear that Imperial intelligence coordinators chose Duluth as a possible site for rebel activity, as will the leaders of the Alliance.

When the group returns, the *Dora* is repaired and, shortly thereafter, the ship takes off and begins the jump to the target system.

THE MISSION BRIEFING

Once the *Anaura Dora* is in hyperspace, the pilots of Red Squadron are called to the ready room for a full briefing. After the pilots have assembled, Captain Randan enters and begins:

"My rebel comrades, in three hours we will arrive at the Tangir star system. Our target world is Bassadiir, the fourth planet orbiting the system's blue-white star. Though Bassadiir is in a somewhat remote system, the planet is a major agricultural exporter. Unfortunately for the world's inhabitants, most of Bassadiir's produce is hauled away by Imperial Navy freight vessels, due to a contract forcibly signed with the Empire that effectively leaves the farmers with a payment that is little more than half the average open-market value.

"Here's where things get interesting. This situation has caused the seeds of rebellion to sprout within the citizenry of Bassadiir. Thus far, there is no unified leadership, and the defiant groups have rejected offers to join the Alliance because, as they put it, they have nothing to gain by allying themselves with us, and they fear we don't truly have the military capability to be a real threat to the Imperial military establishment anyway.

"So our mission is two-fold. The first has already been mentioned. The second is to convince the leaders of the underground movements that the Alliance military forces are capable of taking the war to the Imperials. There is no better way to do this than conducting a strike in their own system.

"The *Dora* will exit hyperspace far out-system, then slowly approach Bassadiir while largely powered down to avoid detection. While doing so, targets will be determined using passive sensors. At this point, you will be given a strike plan. Until then, you should ready yourselves for the strike. I wish you all good luck. And, as always, may the Force be with you."

THE ATTACK

The *Dora* exits hyperspace far out-system and slowly approaches Bassadiir while sensor operators monitor passive sensors to select possible targets. Almost three hours later, it is determined that the only orbital targets are four Imperial bulk freighters. But Captain Randan determines that they'll do just fine, and contacts the squadron commander.

"Commander, we have four targets. Attack data is now being down-loaded to your crafts' computers. We detect no Imperial fighters in close proximity to the targets. You've got a clear run, folks. Remember, our mission does not include engaging combat craft. When you detect TIEs closing in force, break off. Good luck. And hit 'em hard."

The A-Wings are soon launched and on their way. Within minutes Red Squadron reaches long range from the freighters and the attack begins. The turrets on the freighters do not return fire until the second round.

After six combat rounds, Red Squadron receives an emergency transmission from the *Dora*: "Red Squadron. Emergency recall. Repeat, emergency recall. Have detected out-system picket ship. Twelve craft closing fast. Sensors confirm, TIE fighters. We've been made, folks. Hurry back, or they'll cut us to pieces."

DEFENDING THE DORA

When Red Squadron reaches the *Dora*, they see that the TIE squadron has beaten them there and is already attacking the rebel carrier, which has been hit several times, though no serious damage has yet been inflicted. The *Dora's* two turrets are wildly blasting away at the Imperial fighters.

Eight TIE fighters pair off with the A-Wings while the remaining four TIEs continue attacking the carrier. As the A-Wings engage the Imperials, you as Gamemaster may wish to simply determine how the battle goes for the NPC A-Wing pilots and their adversaries without rolling dice. Things will move quicker this way, and you can easily manipulate the outcome of the engagement. If the players don't do too well, the NPC can do some fancy shooting and come to their assistance. Likewise, if the players do extremely well, the rebels should take some damage or casualties somewhere.

The *Dora* survives the battle with its hyperdrives intact. The TIEs are destroyed

but at the cost of much damage and several casualties to the rebels.

When all operative A-Wings have been brought aboard, the *Dora* will retrieve any inoperative fighters. Just before the ship makes the jump to hyperspace, sensors detect twelve craft closing from the direction of the picket ship, and twelve more approaching from Bassadiir. They arrive too late, for the *Anatra Dora* suddenly disappears.

ULTIMATE SUCCESS

Sometime later the underground groups on Bassadiir have agreed to meet with Alliance representatives to discuss joining the galactic cause of freedom. It seems they were indeed impressed that an Imperial fighter squadron was bested by outnumbered rebel fighters. They decided that these rebels may be a threat to the Imperial establishment after all. ●

Gundark's Fantastic Technology

To: Commander Drev Prilarca, NRSF Arms Interdiction Task Force

From: Major Shepprd Barron, CorSec (retired)

RE: "Gundark" Arms Ring

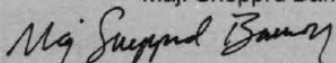
Commander:

As per your request (datapad ref. 92847/98234), I have managed to retrieve files from the CorSec criminal database regarding the individual who operates under the alias "Gundark"—his dossier is attached to this transmission.

I have also acquired a copy of the illegal database that "Gundark" maintains, apparently as a sort of catalog. This catalog is encrypted and covertly inserted into local HoloNet carrier signals, particularly any governmental or law enforcement bandwidths; apparently "Gundark" has a keen sense of irony.

Regards,

Maj. Shepprd Barron



Major Shepprd Barron, CorSec (retired)

"Illegal commercial practices—the sale and distribution of armaments, medicines, droids, computers, explosives and other such commodities—is to become a top priority of His Royal Majesty's Customs and Navy. Emperor Palpatine decrees that all such illicit commerce be stopped immediately, and all troops must make the destruction of these so-called 'black marketeers' a high priority. The unlicensed sale of goods has always been an offense; it henceforth will be upgraded to a Class One infraction, and officers of the Imperial military should exercise all possible force to root out these traitors under direction of the Imperial Bureau of Taxation, Division Three."—Excerpt from a memorandum prepared by Imperial Advisor Ars Dangor shortly before the Battle of Hoth.

"Nothing is illegal...provided you have enough money."—Attributed to an unidentified arms merchant.

T

here's No Such T'ing as a 'Stock' Light Freighter, Boy!

Captain Rars Lefken hunched forward, stabbing his finger at his companion for emphasis. He had drunk at least four mugs of home-brewed fozbeer, but it seemed to have had no appreciable effect. He paused to noisily drain his fifth, then continued.

"Garvan's knees — there's more kinds a light freighters limpin' around than you've got hairs — uh, scales; sorry, my eyesight ain't what it used ta be. Heck, ever'body who owns one of the blasted t'ings messes wit' it in some way. Vair's eyelids — none of 'em are 'stock' any more.

"Shoot, you take a half-dozen freighters — same model, same year, same shipyard — put 'em in operation for a measly couple'a decades under diff'rent owners, then compare 'em. You know what you'll find?"

Lefken grinned and scratched his bearded chin. Something there squeaked and scuttled up his face and into the thick thatch on the top of his head. He continued.

"You'll find six ships, each wit' a diff'rent drive system. Each wit' a diff'rent sublight speed and shielding manifold. The autopilots on half of 'em will have been gutted and replaced wit' a home-made jobbie; most of 'em will have customized weapons systems. Some will have big, stupid-lookin' secondary cargo holds bolted on the outside of the ship — if they don't, they'll have most of their cargo space replaced wit' extra-hot hyperspace engines.

"Myra's tentacles, son — you can do *anyt'ing* to one of those babies and it'll keep running, just as smoot' and easy as the day you got her."

He gazed out the bar's viewport overlooking the landing field. He smiled warmly at his vessel, *Lefken's Dreams*.

"Maybe that's why we love 'em so."

Lefken rose, nodded pleasantly, and left.

It is the firm belief of many observers that the Rebellion against the Empire is as much the story of individual heroes and villains as the tale of an epic struggle of powerful weapons and opposing ideologies. Because the Alliance believes in the value of each separate member and looks upon every contribution as important to the cause, it was decided to keep a detailed record of the Rebellion, concentrating on the individual Rebels themselves. It is a massive undertaking, but those who took on the job displayed the commitment and attention to detail needed to accomplish the mighty task.

The following character profiles have been excerpted from the Official History of the Rebellion, Volume One, and the memoirs of the History's author, Arhul Hextrophon. Hextrophon, who wrote the Official History while serving the Alliance High Command as secretary to Mon Mothma, kept a detailed diary which provides a fascinating view of day-to-day life at the very highest level of the Rebellion and remarkable insight into the people who formed the Alliance.

These profiles were written in the weeks following the destruction of the Imperial Death Star, while the Rebel High Command was reorganizing at the new base on Hoth. The section on Yoda, the enigmatic alien master of the Force, was appended to Hextrophon's personal files and was not included in the original, wide-read version. The entry on Lando Calrissian is a copy of a Rebel intelligence report which Hextrophon viewed in his official capacity as Mothma's secretary; evidently amused by the report, he appended a copy to his file on the smuggler Han Solo. The entries on Boba Fett and Darth Vader are from Imperial holotransmissions intercepted by Alliance spies, as well as additional research conducted by the historian.

Han Solo

Author's Note: It is not the historian's place to pass judgment upon an individual; instead, he should simply describe the circumstances of his or her life and let the reader decide. However, for this article, the author believes it is appropriate to detail his opinions on the subject, Han Solo, so that the reader may recognize the author's personal bias.

Han Solo is without a doubt a smuggler and pirate. He is wanted for a variety of crimes on a dozen planets throughout the galaxy — both within and outside of the Empire. He consorts with unsavory characters from the dark underbelly of civilization. He has several prices on his head, from both the Empire and notorious underworld figures. He is quick to anger, and follows no rules but his own. He is a thorough rogue.

Three years ago, the author and his family were assaulted and taken captive by Zygerrian slavers. After several terrifying and horribly uncomfortable months spent in darkness in the hold of their ship, the vessel was rocked by a series of explosions. We huddled together fearfully, awaiting whatever new terrors Fate had in store for us. About 10 minutes passed; we could hear the sound of a terrific battle in the corridors outside our prison. Suddenly, the door opened. There, in the light, stood Solo, blaster pointed directly at us. He paused, looked at my dirty, shivering, starving family for several long moments.

Then, an expression of pity on his face, he muttered "Slavers — that's why they abandoned ship," and disappeared, leaving the door behind him open. I struggled to my feet and limped after him as best I could. Approaching the bridge, I discovered Solo and his Wookiee companion alone at the controls, adjusting assorted dials. Solo looked at me for a moment, looked away, then asked if I could pilot this ship. When I answered in the affirmative, he and Chewbacca strode off through the airlock to their own vessel, Chewbacca snarling "good luck" in Wookiee as he left. I had barely time to stammer a quick "thank you" before the airlock slammed shut and the Millennium Falcon flew off.

It wasn't until days later that I realized that Han Solo, notorious pirate, miscreant, and villain, had left behind all of the Zygerrians' treasure for my destitute family.

C-3PO (See-Threepio) and R2-D2 (Artoo-Deetoo)

When future historians look back upon the events of the Rebellion, they will be hard-pressed to explain the remarkable success which this small, rag-tag group has attained against the mighty monolithic Empire. Even if — deity forbid — the Emperor and Lord Darth Vader were to snuff out the flame of resistance throughout the entire galaxy tomorrow, and the evil Empire were to reign unopposed for the next millenia, those who have served in the Alliance could still be proud and amazed at their brilliant accomplishments. It is interesting, and perhaps a little humbling, to recognize how much of the Rebellion's success is owed to two scratched and dented pieces of self-aware metal.

Recently, the author had the opportunity to talk to R2-D2 and C-3PO. The pair has remarkably complete personalities, including humor and ego. The interview was pleasant and sometimes amusing, but the author often found it difficult to keep the two on the subject, as Artoo has an extremely short attention span, and the only thing Threepio ever really wants to discuss is how difficult his life is and how much trouble Artoo has gotten them into (though it is obvious they are fast friends). The author was reluctant to order the Droids to talk to the point, both because of the debt the Rebellion owes to them, and because of a personal belief in the dignity of all self-aware creatures, be they animal, vegetable or, indeed, mineral.

Obi-Wan Kenobi

Author's Note: Like the entry on Darth Vader, most of the information about Obi-Wan Kenobi was gleaned through interviews with Bail Organa, Kenobi's friend and fellow soldier in the Clone Wars. Though, at the time, the author did not know the importance that Kenobi would assume to the Rebellion, when it became apparent that Alderaan would soon break in open revolt from the Empire, Organa requested the author's help in tracking down Kenobi's whereabouts. To assist the search through old computer records, Organa gave as much background about Kenobi to the author as he had time to in those hectic days.

In addition to Organa's information, the author has conducted several in-depth interviews with Luke Skywalker, Kenobi's last student.

Yoda

From the Personal Records of Arhul Hextrophon, Historian to the Rebellion: *I wonder if I'll ever be free to publish this.*

I met Yoda after a long and arduous search through extremely old and classified data files at the University of Charmath, followed by a long, arduous and wet search through the swamps of Dagobah. Upon first glance, Yoda appears to be a simple-minded, if not actually senile, but harmless swamp-dweller. He kept up this facade for several days, but eventually, under prolonged prodding from me, admitted to being the Jedi Master.

He seemed saddened by the admission, explaining that he kept up the illusion because it was imperative to the future of the galaxy that he remain in hiding. He said that he was surprised that I found him, believing all references to him destroyed. He apologized, and said that since I knew he was still alive, he would have to wipe my brain of all knowledge of him. As he said this, he seemed to grow in stature and power.

I had no doubt that he could do what he said.

I can think of nothing worse that one could do to a historian than destroy his memories. In terror, I protested, proclaiming that I would never tell that I knew him. My fear grew as he approached, until I was prostrate with fear. I closed my eyes and awaited — I knew not what.

Time passed. When nothing happened, I ventured to open my eyes and look about me. There, in front of me, stood Yoda, looking small, frail, sad and overwhelmingly tired and alone. He said, "What use saving the galaxy is if so much hurt and pain one must cause? The Jedi way that is not. No. Hurt you I won't. Trust you I will, trust you . . . and the Force. The Jedi way that is." He sighed, then smiled. "Be good to speak again it will."

I have never told anyone what we spoke of that day and the days which followed. He said I would be able to tell others, once all the great deeds were done — if I survive. I wonder what he meant?

After I left Dagobah, I returned to Charmath and carefully wiped all references to Yoda from the University's computers. Now I wonder if I should wipe this record as well.

Boba Fett

(The following Imperial Communique #3674.11g from Major Herrit of Imperial Intelligence to Lord Darth Vader was leaked to the Rebellion by an unknown source. The Rebel Alliance, in turn, leaked the communique to the public in order to expose the Empire's illegal practices. It was hoped that such an action would gain support for the Rebellion while discrediting Vader and the New Order; what it in fact did was alert the Alliance rank and file to yet another danger inherent in joining the Rebellion. In the final analysis, the information hurt Rebel morale more than it helped Rebel recruitment.)

Lord Vader,

By Imperial directive, my staff has compiled information concerning the abilities and performance records of a number of bounty hunters operating within the Empire. Of these, I have personally selected the five best suited to your particular requirements. These are Bossk, Zuckuss, Dengar, IG-88, and Boba Fett. If anyone can find the elusive Rebels you seek, it is these men. Enclosed you will find a brief dossier on each of these unique individuals. But I wish to speak to you of one of these men at length, for he seems the most capable — and dangerous — of them: Boba Fett.

Criminals captured by Fett have reported that the inner cargo hold of *Slave I* serves as a prison, complete with force cage and reinforced hull supports.

As far as personality — Fett doesn't have one. He displays no fear, anger, love, hate, remorse, pity, happiness, sadness, or any other emotion. He is cautious, prepared, and totally professional. In fact, some of my men believe he might be a Droid, though no one known has the skill required to build such a machine — Fett eats assassin Droids for breakfast.

In closing, Boba Fett is a hunter and killer without equal. By all means, hire him: he's worth his exorbitant fee. While the other bounty hunters may turn up leads to explore, Fett will track down your Rebel quarry, capture it, and kill it if you give the order.

I remain your faithful servant,

Major Herrit, Imperial Intelligence.

Darth Vader

Author's Note: The following information was compiled from conversations with Luke Skywalker, former student of Obi-Wan Kenobi, and from interviews with Bail Organa, Vader's contemporary and fellow warrior in the Clone Wars, several weeks before Organa's death in the cataclysm at Alderaan.

While the author himself has little experience with the mystical energy these men call "the Force," he must admit that, without accepting the Force as a real, powerful phenomenon, it is impossible to account for the extraordinary successes which Vader has attained in such a short time. (Additionally, Skywalker and Organa, two of the most intelligent and down-to-earth men the author has ever met, believe in it explicitly.)

Thus, this article is based upon the premise that Darth Vader is, in fact, a lord of the Dark Side of the Force — a mystical power which pervades the entire galaxy. If, in spite of the evidence, the reader wishes to continue to believe that the Force is a fraud and the Jedi do it all with mirrors, the author can only suggest that he challenge Skywalker to a mock lightsaber duel. The author did.

Luke beat me — blindfolded.

The Contact

Sweat beaded on Kaj Nedmak's brow. This section of Angjon was *not* on any tourist maps, and for good reason. The smuggler eyed the dimly lit alley warily. Windows within reach appeared to be locked tightly against unwanted intruders, and doors were undoubtedly bolted.

Walking slowly into the deepening shadows, Kaj swiped a gloved hand across his forehead. He told himself *again* that running guns for the Rebel Alliance made perfect sense. But as the alley seemed to swallow him, he began to wonder if the information he'd won in a sabacc game—in lieu of credits—would actually pay off.

Perhaps his partner Crimson had been right. They'd had no luck attempting to contact the Alliance. Every lead had turned into a dead end. Why would this time be any different?

A movement at the far end of the alley caught Kaj's eye. Three silent figures moved with a purpose that could only mean trouble. Knots clenched Kaj's gut. Lights flicked on in a second-story window—just enough light to glint off white armor. Stormtroopers!

"Stang!" Kaj cursed to himself. "A set-up."

Kaj buried himself in the shadows. Something brushed against his boot. Glancing down, he spotted a jaykah scurrying toward a pile of trash heaped against the wall a few meters away. The clicking of the small furry creature's claws against the old stone pavement made Kaj wince. He wasn't surprised when the stormtroopers turned toward the noise and opened fire.

A burst of blaster fire raked the trash heap. The jaykah shrieked out in pain. Teeth bared, it leaped from its hiding place and charged its attackers. Standing their ground, the Imperials blasted the poor creature to pulp.

Lights flicked on in a handful of windows and illuminated the scene in a yellowish glow as the stormtroopers advanced. Kaj ducked into a doorway, his breathing jagged and fierce. He glanced back the way he'd come. *Too far*. The chance of his reaching the corner before the troopers found their mark would be like drawing a pure sabacc in the first round.

That left one option. Kaj eyed his adversaries. He hoped to get off a blast before they noticed him, but a shot pinging off the wall centimeters above his head told him his luck had run out.

Kaj opened fire, his first volley right on target. One Imperial down. The other stormtroopers answered Kaj's blast with a barrage of gunfire. The noise reverberated through the alley and mingled with another familiar sound—the rev of an engine. The stormtroopers heard it, too. Kaj peered past them just as the XP-38 roared up the alley. With a blaster resting atop the landspeeder's windshield, the maniacal driver opened fire. One of the troopers fell as a torrent of gunfire thundered through the narrow street.

Shots suddenly erupted behind Kaj and a blast whipped past his head. He jerked around and spotted two more stormtroopers hugging the alley wall and moving rapidly in his direction. Kaj winged one in the shoulder. His second shot sent the trooper careening head-first into the pavement. The man's companion slipped into a narrow doorway and fired several more rounds.

The exchange of blaster fire at Kaj's back swelled, then just as suddenly ceased. Hoping that the XP-38's driver had won that round, Kaj rolled into the alley to get off one clear shot. His firelight lit the shadows, and a moment later his final opponent slumped to the ground.

"Come on!" a familiar voice shouted from the landspeeder.

Scrambling off the ground, Kaj ran toward the speeder, hurdled the prone bodies of the stormtroopers, and leapt into the vehicle.

"Thanks." Kaj nodded as the driver hit the accelerator and barreled out of the alley. He glanced sidelong at the slight figure next to him and grinned. A few strands of red hair peeked out beneath the hat that covered his rescuer's head. The collar of her dark blue flight jacket was turned up.

"Trouble always manages to follow you, Kaj," Celia "Crimson" Durasha told her partner. Whipping the speeder onto the main street, the young woman weaved in and out of traffic through Angjon's business district. She flicked those emerald eyes at him and a smile washed across her face. "Lucky for you, so do I."

"Thanks, Crimson," he said. "Could've been the end of me back there."

"I know."

Kaj chuckled softly to himself. "You don't learn, do you?"

"Nope. But it was just dumb luck that I showed up, Kaj. I was at the CardSafe, trying to scrounge up information about this Rebel contact of yours. I never imagined that smugglers and thieves were such a suspicious bunch." She smirked. "Can you explain to me *again* why

we're doing this? There must be an easier way to earn the credits we need to pay off Bwahl the Hutt and Rass M'Guy."

Kaj ignored her question. "How'd you end up in the alley?" he asked.

"The barkeeper gave me the name Raider, the same one you had. Considering we got it from two different sources, I was beginning to think we finally might track down one of these Rebels."

"Yeah, so then what?"

"Luck was on your side... again. I overheard a couple of Rodians at the pub bragging about a Rebel operative they turned over to the authorities."

"Raider," Kaj said matter-of-factly. "Poor guy must've spilled his guts to the Imperials. That explains why our stormtrooper buddies showed up."

"And being the resourceful person that I am, I followed them." Crimson guided the landspeeder down a side street and out of the flow of traffic. Office buildings gave way to dilapidated warehouses, and the air was thick with the smells of the nearby seaport. A heavy mist enshrouded the area.

"Well, you showed up just in time, Red." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "So, do we know where they're holding him?"

Crimson glanced at her partner. She knew what was coming. And she knew she wasn't going to like it.

"Well?" Kaj asked.

"You can't be serious," she sighed.

"Why not?"

"You want to break a Rebel spy out of an Imperial garrison?"

"Since when does one office—occupied by four officers on the first floor of the Jardansen building—constitute a garrison? It's just a little ol' detachment."

Crimson scowled.

"Okay, so maybe there's a few dozen stormtroopers there, too," Kaj conceded. "C'mon, how hard could it be to get this guy out? The Empire isn't set up in Angjon the way—"

“We’re already in deep poodoo with Bwahl and Rass,” she pointed out. “Let’s rethink this debt-reducing plan you’ve implanted in your brain. Maybe we should just head to the opposite side of the Rim and bury ourselves in work.”

“Look,” Kaj said, running his finger gently across her cheek, “we get this Reb out and we secure ourselves a steady job running guns or supplies—”

She slapped his hand away. “We don’t even know if they can pay.”

“At least we won’t have to worry where our next meal comes from. And I hear those Alliance bases have the tools we’ll need to keep the *Starlight Red* in tip-top condition.”

“Ha! I hear they have so few supplies they’re begging for help wherever they can get it.”

“Come on, Red, that’s just Imperial propaganda coming down the newsnets.”

“Fine. But what about Bwahl and Rass?” They had barely escaped from the last bounty hunter hired by those two *businessmen*. “They’ll come after us again—you know they will. We need to stay as far from them as we can get.”

“Well, knowing how the Rebels operate, we probably *will* be as far from them as we can get.”

Crimson pulled the landspeeder off to the side of the road. She stared at lights from Angjon’s spaceport glowing eerily through the mists. “I don’t know.”

Kaj grabbed Crimson’s wrist, a little more tightly than usual. If it caused her any discomfort, she chose not to show it. “Stang, what’s your problem? I know it ain’t just fear talking here. You and me have been through worse trouble than this to get work before. If this were any other job, you’d go along with it. Why are you so hung up about this Rebel thing, huh? What did they ever do to you, to make you so angry?” Kaj gently brushed his fingers against Crimson’s hand. She pointedly ignored him. The sting left his voice as he turned her face in his hands and looked her straight in the eyes. “Look, I’m sorry. I just care too much about you to see you like this, and I want to help.”

A slight tremble betrayed the stoic posture Crimson was trying so hard to maintain. She met Kaj’s gaze, bit her lip, and looked away. Finally, she simply said, “The Rebels killed my brother.”

Kaj stared, his head cocked in confusion. “You mean a member of the Rebellion murdered him? Well, frag, Crimson, that’s awful, but it’s still no reason to blame the entire—”

She jerked her hand from his. “Yes, it *is*, Kaj.” The sharpness of her response silenced him. “Raine’s unit was ambushed by the Rebels.”

“He served the Empire?”

Crimson clenched and unclenched her jaw. “Raine was assigned to Ralltiir. He was slaughtered where he stood before he had any chance to defend himself.” She punched the throttle. “The Rebels are so quick to point out the atrocities committed by the Empire. So quick to scream in outrage at the slaughter of innocent victims, to show that they represent the good and the just. And maybe they do.” Her jaw stiffened. “But my brother never committed any atrocities. He never slaughtered any innocents.”

Kaj wondered how she could be sure of this, but remained silent.

“Raine was a good man,” Crimson said, “an honest man, who just wanted to serve in the only way he knew how. The day he was killed, it wasn’t the Empire who committed the atrocity. It was the Rebels. I’ll never forgive them for that.”

The two smugglers sat in silence for a moment, the only noise coming from the XP-38’s engine. “I’m sorry, Crimson.” Kaj shook his head as his partner’s reluctance to take sides became clear. “I can see why you don’t trust the Rebels. If they killed my brother, I’d have a hard time trusting them, too. But you told me yourself that your best friend was murdered by the Empire. So my point is this: if you can’t trust either side, you might as well go with the one that puts you in the least danger. And last I heard, the Rebels don’t have a bounty on your head.”

Crimson exhaled loudly but said nothing as she kicked the speeder back in gear. A few moments later they pulled up to the Dyjillan Landing Strip, where they’d berthed their ship, the *Starlight Red*. The battered YT-1300 freighter, once called the *Faceted*, was heavily modified, complete with a wide variety of non-sanctioned weapons and sensor attachments. It would be an asset to the Alliance—if the two smugglers could locate them.

Crimson powered down the speeder and turned in her seat to face her partner. She sighed. “All right. Just answer me this, Kaj. Say we go through with this and manage to get this guy Raider out of that prison. Say that, out of gratitude, he lets us work for the Alliance, and that by some miracle we don’t get killed running guns. What then? How do we convince Bwahl and Rass not to use us for kindling? How do we get rid of the Imperial bounty on my head? What are our long-range plans? Do we even have any long-range plans? We can’t keep running forever, you know. Where is this leading us?”

“To a way out, Crimson—”

She snorted in derision.

“—and for now, that’s all I can promise you.” Kaj gently took her hand. “Look, I don’t know where the future will bring us, anymore than you do. But whatever we have to face, we can get through it together. Trust me on this, Red.” He pecked her lightly on the cheek. “After a good night’s sleep, you’ll see I’m right.”

The Jardansen building was not the norm for Imperial prison complexes. The modest-sized plastone structure, with three floors and an inordinate number of windows, had once been a factory for the production of sabacc decks and other card games. The Empire had never taken much notice of Angjon, but an increase in Rebel activities was motive enough for posting small detachments on this world and others known to harbor smugglers who, oftentimes, didn’t care who paid their wages. Rather than wasting credits on unnecessary construction, the Imperials had simply annexed existing buildings for their own purposes and moved right in. The Jardansen Corporation had been among the first to go.

“This is going to be easier than spotting a Hutt in a den of sand-lice,” Kaj said to Crimson from their perch atop a building across from the prison. “Typical Imperial arrogance—they think no one would ever dare break a prisoner out, so they don’t make it too difficult to try.”

Crimson peered across the street, then bent low to get out of view. Shuffling closer to Kaj, she removed her uncomfortable helmet. “Call me crazy, but my guess is they probably think the thirty-plus stormtroopers they have inside just might make people think twice about it.”

“Ya’ think?”

Crimson scowled but the ire from last night’s conversation had left her voice. She glanced at the two unconscious men they’d tucked against a large power generator on the far side of the roof. “Those guards will be missed any minute now. The uniforms may get us in the front door, but then what?” She tapped the white plastoid armor covering her chest. “We don’t even have a plan for getting Raider out yet. What are we going to do, just walk right in and say, ‘Hi, we’re here to free one of your prisoners?’”

Kaj chuckled nervously and pulled out a pair of macrobinoculars to scan the windows of the prison. They had been slightly darkened and had thick metal bars mounted on both sides of the glass, but he could still make out the shapes of moving figures. “All right, we have two guys standing guard outside the building. Inside and to the left, I see the main

guard post. Two officers and four stormtroopers there. Then there's another dozen or so stormies guarding the cells, stationed at various points down the corridor. Can't tell where the rest of the troops are."

Crimson scoffed. The more she thought about this idea, the less she liked it.

"Looks like only the first floor is being used. From here, I'd guess at least fifty prisoners in individual cells. No idea which one of them is Raider, though," he added.

"No problem," Crimson said, rolling her eyes. "We can just free them all."

Kaj bent down and removed his helmet. His face beamed. "My thought, exactly." He leaned over and kissed her full on the lips.

"Wha—?" she stammered as Kaj hurried down the ladder. Recovering from her surprise, Crimson put on her helmet and scampered after him.

'Stormtroopers' Kaj and Crimson crossed the street to the Jardansen building. Shoulders squared, Kaj nodded confidently to the guards at the front door, then hurriedly approached the main guard post with Crimson one step behind. The officer in charge, a middle-aged captain, looked up in irritation and studied Kaj's hidden face. "What are you doing in—"

"The prisoners are escaping, sir," Kaj reported.

"What?" the officer half-shouted as he jumped to his feet.

Two of the guards turned immediately to scanners on the main control panel to verify the escape. "I detect no anomalies, Captain," one guard reported. "No signs of any unrest in the prison block."

"That's because it hasn't started yet," Kaj said as he pulled his blaster rifle and burned a hole into the stormtrooper's armor.

Before the other Imperials could react, Crimson swung her rifle up. She loosed a barrage of gunfire, catching the captain and two of his guards with blasts that sent them careening backward into the wall.

Kaj hammered the second officer and the other guard, then jumped for the control panel. Taking a moment to rip his helmet off and draw in a deep breath of unrecycled air, he found the controls for the detention block and released all the cell doors. "Come on!" he shouted.

Kaj and Crimson sprinted for the adjoining corridor, jumping over the bodies of two stormtroopers, their white armor streaked with blackened blasts. They dashed into the cellblock amidst utter mayhem. Freed prisoners pounced on startled guards and wrestled them for weapons. Kaj let out a war cry and headed toward the nearest guard, his blaster rifle poised to strike. Crimson quickly scanned the second level walkway. No sign of other guards... yet. Grasping her weapon tightly, she sprinted to catch up with her partner.

Slipping through a prisoner's grasp, one stormtrooper sounded a general alarm and headed toward the stairs. A half-dozen prisoners bolted after him. He was caught halfway up the stairs and ungracefully tossed over the side to the ferrocrete below. Surprise, enthusiasm, and sheer numbers were on the side of the prisoners, and within moments, most of the guards were subdued.

The inmates darted toward the exit, grabbing the fallen troopers' weapons. Kaj was about to speak when a blast struck the wall right above his head. He whipped back in the direction of the shot. Three of the prisoners were shooting at him!

"Hey, wait," Kaj yelled. "I'm not the Empire! I just freed you, you ungrateful—"

Another shot scorched the ferrocrete directly behind Crimson, and the smugglers began to raise their weapons in defense. Suddenly, a barrage of blaster shots rained down on the confusion from the second level walkway. Two of the prisoners with weapons collapsed a few meters from Kaj, barely a heartbeat away from killing him themselves.

Crimson hammered away at the sea of white armor above them. A shot fired from somewhere in the room singed the faceplate of her helmet. She pulled it off, tossed it aside, and blasted another guard.

"Stang," Kaj yelled, firing randomly at the stormtroopers on the second level.

"Well, I think we know where all the other guards are now!" Crimson shouted.

Bodies piled up as the firefight mounted. One prisoner turned and ran toward Kaj and Crimson. He wore a dark hood, and his body was tall and lithe. Kaj turned his blaster on the man but a second before he fired Crimson caught his arm. "Kaj, no! He's not armed."

Kaj held his fire, but a well-aimed shot from above caught him in the shoulder. Cursing, he fell back against the wall, hitting it with a thud.

"Kaj!" Crimson cried.

The unarmed prisoner stooped down by Kaj, offered him his hand, and yelled over the chaos, "Can you run?"

“Yeah, I’m okay.” Kaj gave Crimson a thumb’s up, and then turned to the prisoner. “Who are you?”

“I’m Raider.”

“Frag! You won’t believe this, but—”

“No time for that now,” Raider said. He locked eyes with Crimson from beneath the hood. There was a familiar gentleness there that unnerved her. He took her arm. “Let’s go. It won’t be long before reinforcements arrive.”

Shakily, saying nothing, Crimson let Raider lead the way. They raced back through the guard post, hurdling fallen bodies. She looked back to see if they were being followed, but the occupied troops hadn’t noticed their retreat. Outside the building, they weaved through a group of alarmed passersby. Kaj sprinted past their companion, skirted through a nearby alleyway, and turned into a darkened garage, where their landspeeder was parked.

Without waiting to be invited, Raider jumped into the driver’s seat. Kaj shrugged, climbed into the passenger’s side, and offered a hand to Crimson. She barely made it aboard the speeder as it accelerated too quickly for the compensators to adapt. Kaj let out an uncharacteristic gasp as she fell awkwardly into his lap, slamming into his injured shoulder.

Crimson glared at their companion as he gunned the engine. “Hey,” she complained, “just what in the worlds do you think—”

Raider turned to her and removed his hood. His long, fiery hair was matted and coarse, the hair on his face the same shade of red. She knew that face and hair well, as though they were her very own.

Crimson gasped. “Raine!”

“Raine?” Kaj repeated, staring at a masculine version of his partner. “Good skies!”

“You’re alive,” Crimson exclaimed, throwing her arms around her brother’s neck. “By the stars, Raine, you’re alive!”

Crimson’s sudden movement caused Raine to jerk the controls, swerving the speeder into oncoming traffic. “Whoa,” he shouted, pulling hard to the right. “Hold on, Celi. Calm down before you get us all killed.”

Crimson released her near-stranglehold. “You’re alive,” she repeated, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her hands trembled as she reached over to touch the red stubble on

Raine's face. Shaking her head in disbelief, she brushed her hand along his shoulder and held onto his arm, afraid to let go. "I don't understand...how did you get here?" she asked. "The reports said you'd been killed in a Rebel ambush on Ralltiir."

"He doesn't look dead to me," Kaj offered.

Raine grimaced, then looked at his sister. "That's a very long story, sis. Maybe we should get out of Angjon, then find a minute to lay back on a hill somewhere and stare at the stars, like we did when we were kids—"

"And talk about hopes and dreams," Crimson finished his sentence. She paused and threw him a wink. "And dying as Imperial soldiers, coming back to life as Rebel operatives?"

"Yeah," he grinned.

"I'd like to hear that story," Kaj said, "but if you want to get out of Angjon, you're headed in the opposite direction from the spaceport."

Raine nodded and turned northward, guiding the landspeeder out of town. "Speaking of stories, Celi, how did a cruise ship navigator end up serving as a backup on this mission? I'll have to thank my friends for sending you to watch over me." He chuckled. "Do you two enjoy dressing up as stormtroopers and breaking into Imperial detention centers?"

"I left Galaxy Tours and hooked up with Kaj a couple of years ago," Crimson told her brother.

Raine nodded. "About the same time the Empire destroyed Alderaan."

Crimson cast her eyes downward and chewed on her lip. "I didn't leave my job because of—"

"We weren't sent by the Alliance to watch your back, Raine," Kaj interrupted.

"Raine is dead. I go by Raider now," he said flatly. He glanced at Crimson. "Sorry, I don't mean to be so blunt." He frowned. "Wait, you don't work for the Alliance? Maybe you'd better start explaining."

"Remember the guy you were planning to meet in an alley last night? Well, that's me. The name's Kaj Nedmak. Crimson and I are free-traders, looking for steady work. Thought we could help you move the shipment you were here to check on."

"Crimson?" Raider tilted his sister's chin up, glancing sidelong at her face and hair and the fire in her eyes. "Nice name—it suits you."

Kaj persisted. "What do you think, Raider? Can you put us to work?"

"You broke me out of an Imperial prison just to get a job?"

"Yeah, we've been trying to make contact with the Alliance."

"Why?"

"We need the work," Crimson said.

"And?"

"And we're trying to keep a few steps ahead of a couple of lowlifes who would like to dump Kaj into a rancor's den."

"Trouble with the Empire?" Raider asked as he turned down the dimly lit road toward the spaceport.

"Not me," Kaj replied. "But Crimson has an Imp bounty—"

Crimson placed her hand over Kaj's mouth. "It's a long story."

"Long story, eh?" Raider smiled. "Guess that one will have to wait, too."

"How do I look?"

Crimson glanced up as her clean-shaven brother strolled into the *Starlight Red's* crew lounge. "*That's* the man I remember." She winked.

Kaj placed his mug down on the system's console, winced at a spike of shoulder pain from his bandaged wound, and sized up Raider's appearance. "Quite a change from before, but the red hair could mark you, my friend. I'll have Uthre dig out some—"

"That's okay. My cap will cover up the red." Raider smiled and sat down beside his sister. "Now let's get down to business. You said you wanted to work for the Alliance. A week or so ago—"

"Would you care for some cold raava, Master Durasha?"

Raider turned to the tray-carrying protocol droid. Similar to the standard 3PO model, it had enough differences from that design—particularly its greenish tint—to mark it as being from the THR series. The voice, however, pleasant and yet possessing a rather aristocratic air, confirmed that the two series were related.

"No thanks, U-THR. Maybe later. I'll need my head clear for the job ahead. We *all* will." He looked pointedly at Kaj, who had lifted his mug back up to his lips. Kaj stopped in mid-

swig, then pretended not to have heard the comment as he downed the remainder of his mug and signaled for the droid to give him a refill.

Raider snorted. “Anyway, as I was saying, a week or so ago, my cargo pilot got nabbed in a barroom brawl.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” the droid said.

“Trey was a good friend and one helluva pilot. They must’ve killed him. His death is a loss for the Rebellion.” Raider’s tone became more earnest. “If I can locate his stash, I’ll need transportation to get it out of here. We can use small ships like yours, good pilots, skilled infiltrators... but the pay isn’t great. Credits are hard to come by in this line of work.”

“Well, that is a factor, of course,” Kaj indicated, “but there are other things like food, shelter, parts to keep our ship up to spec—”

“And?” Raider fixed his gaze on Crimson.

Crimson and her brother had always been close—enough so that reading verbal cues, body language, and each other’s mind was almost second nature. She knew what he was getting at, and she didn’t like it. “Skip the ideology lessons and keep your politics to yourself.” She groaned, her face flushing bright red. “My best friend was gunned down by the Empire. *You* were killed by the Rebels. But here you are, and now you’re working for them!” She looked away a moment, her anger giving way to confusion. “My friend Kaileel told me to look deeply at the Empire, to see the evil there—”

“He was right, Celi.”

“The way I see it, there’s ugly on both sides,” she said. “I don’t want to make it *my* battle. I can’t. And I’m sorry about that, but don’t you see? I just want a job that puts food in my belly. If working for the Alliance does that, then that’s okay with me.”

“Celi, you can’t be saying you’d work for the Empire—”

“No, of course not.” She shook her head and sighed. “It’s not that I think the Rebels are right *or* wrong. It’s just that everything I’ve struggled to deal with—”

“The commitments you’ve avoided,” Raider added bluntly.

Crimson’s voice tightened. “I was angry and hurt. I hated the Rebels because I thought they’d killed you.”

Kaj reached across the table and took her hand. “It’s okay, Crimson,” he said softly.

“What do you expect me to say now?” Crimson asked Raider, staring her brother in the eye. “‘I love the Rebs?’ Give me a little while to adjust to this idea.”

“I know. This must be a bit of a shock,” Raider conceded.

“A bit of a shock?” she replied, gripping Kaj’s hand tightly. “Think bigger, brother dear.”

“Like an exploding Death Star?”

Crimson tried to force a smile. “Yeah, that’s more like it.”

For a long moment, no one said a word. Even Uthre seemed to be going out of his way to avoid eye contact with the others. Finally, Kaj slapped a hand across his knee. “So Raider—you think you might be able to put us to work?” he asked.

Raider took a deep breath. “The Imps are probably scouring the city trying to find my cargo *and* the three of us. Staying in Angjon can’t be a great idea.”

“You came all the way here to find out what happened to your pilot and cargo,” Kaj said. “Might as well finish what you started. This shipment must be pretty important to the Alliance. Just what’s in it, anyway?”

“Supplies our bases need—medical stuff, weapons, explosives, repulsor-coil heaters”

Kaj’s brow rose at that last item. “Doing some modifications for cold weather?”

Raider shrugged a “maybe,” refusing to divulge more information. “Even if we locate the cargo, we still have to blast out of here without getting inspected.” His eyes drifted from Crimson to Kaj then back again. A slight grin curled the edges of his mouth. “But if you’re game, there is one more place I’d like to have a look at.”

After a pause, Crimson nodded and tried to return his smile. Raider gave her a reassuring hug, then slapped a comradely hand on Uthre’s metal shoulder. “On second thought, Uthre, I think I could use that drink now.”

The bartender at the CardSafe happily obliged the smugglers with the address of Raider’s original cargo hauler. Two hundred credits poorer, Crimson, her brother, and Kaj whipped down a residential street in their XP-38. High-rise structures connected aboveground by covered walkways smothered the district, suffocating it in gloomy shadows.

The pilot's apartment was unpretentious and sparsely decorated, aside from a plastone statue of Emperor Palpatine, a classic image of the shriveled monarch benevolently bestowing his New Order upon the galaxy. Crimson raised an eye at the statue, surprised to see such an item in the home of a Rebel.

She wasn't sure what Raider was looking for, but the sharp focus of his eyes as they scanned the room told her volumes about his expertise as a Rebel operative. With a vigilance originally bred through service to the Empire, he checked the entire apartment for clues as to the whereabouts of the cargo, but the search proved fruitless.

Exhaling loudly, hands opening and closing as though needing to stay active, Raider picked up the statue of Palpatine and idly read the inscription at the bottom: "From Chaos, Order. From Decadence, Control. From Corruption, Purity." He laughed coldly. "To think that our family—that I—bought into this twisted rhetoric." Turning, he hurled the statue to the floor, where it cracked in half with a satisfying crash.

A smile crept across Raider's face. Following his gaze, Crimson and Kaj found themselves smiling as well.

On the floor, amidst plastone dust and the jagged halves of the statue, a metal object shined. A small key cylinder with a hexagonal base and smooth rounded top. And scratched in crude lettering on the cylinder—an address.

Crimson tromped up to the only door she hadn't tried to open at the darkened warehouse. It was only a meter high, more suitable an entrance for a Jawa than for a human. The cylinder's hexagonal end slid smoothly into the lock. *Wouldn't you know it?* A slight smile washed across her face when the lock clicked. Nodding inconspicuously to the skiff parked a block away, she shoved open the door.

On the wall just inside the warehouse, Crimson located the lights and an adjacent control panel which opened a pair of huge double doors. Their recent string of luck seemed uncanny. Somehow, things were falling into place a bit too easily. A sudden chill wracked her body as the skiff pulled in to the cavernous room. Her eyes drifted toward the ceiling. Mounted security cameras!

Crimson slapped the controls to close the doors, grabbed her DL-44, and blasted the nearest camera. Kaj saw the streak of light and its target. Spotting a second camera mounted in the opposite corner of the room, he opened fire. "Company's coming," he shouted as Crimson anxiously scanned the room for other security measures and other ways to escape. "Let's move it."

Raider jumped from the vehicle and forced open one of the containers that lined the wall. Carefully pushing aside the blankets and medkits, he inspected its contents. He eyed some megonite charges, then hefted a brand new BlasTech A280. Satisfied, he turned to his comrades. "Okay, this is what we're looking for. Kaj, can you—"

Floodlights filled the room with blinding luminescence.

"You there—hold it!"

Half-blinded by the floodlights, Kaj remained still as two stormtroopers stepped toward him. Raider, partially obscured by the skiff, kept his weapon out of sight.

"You're coming with us," one trooper ordered. "The administrator wants a word with you."

Raider sneered. "Yeah—and the word is... *Drop!*"

Kaj dove for cover as Raider swung the A280 around in one fluid movement, his finger melding with the trigger. One stormtrooper pulled off a well-aimed shot before Raider blew him away. Wincing, Raider ignored the burnt, swollen patch on his arm and fired at the second guard. His shot went wide. Another laser blast streaked across the room from the door. Crimson's blaster found its mark.

"You two all right?" Raider asked.

Crimson trotted toward her companions. She helped Kaj back to his feet. "We're fine, but those stormtroopers were waiting for us," she said.

"I told you the Empire would be looking for this cargo," Raider replied, scrutinizing the room.

Kaj rubbed his shoulder, still sore from the blast he'd taken during the prison breakout. "Looks like they found it."

Despite the throbbing pain in his arm, Raider hefted an unmarked crate onto the skiff. "We don't have much time. Let's haul these weapons onto the skiff and get out of here."

Crimson nodded. "I'll have Uthre ready the *Starlight Red* so we can lift off as soon as we get back."

"Freighter *Faceted*, this is Lieutenant Yma Smada at Dyjillan Port Control. Our scanners show your ship powering up for liftoff. You do not have authorization for

departure. Please power down immediately, or your docking privileges will be revoked. Repeat, this is Dyjillan Port Control. Abort your departure. You do not have clearance. Acknowledge immediately.”

Seated in the cockpit, Kaj Nedmak laughed and smacked the armrest of his captain’s chair. “Ha! Maybe it’s not such a bad thing that I never got around to changing the ship’s ID registry with BoSS. We’re still broadcasting as the *Faceted*.”

“Don’t start celebrating yet, Kaj,” Crimson retorted, pointing to starboard. “Port Control isn’t the only one taking notice of us.”

Kaj shot a look in the direction she was pointing and swore at the sight of a squad of troops running toward their freighter.

“And TIEs screaming in from port,” Crimson added.

“Blast!” Kaj shouted. “Out of the Dune Sea, into the Sarlacc pit.” He toggled an overhead switch. “Raider, we’ve got company. Better get to the lower turret. Something tells me this liftoff is gonna make the Maw Cluster look like a Rulaarian pleasure cruise.”

“Understood,” Raider’s voice transmitted back from the cargo hold.

Crimson activated switches on the nav panel. “Kaj, I don’t know if the *Red*’s in any shape right now to stare down three eyeballs.”

“I don’t think we have much choice.” His fingers played across the controls like a Bith rocking out on a fanfar, and the YT-1300 lifted off so fast that the smugglers were yanked back hard into their seats. “The only thing we can do now is try to blind them.”

“Right,” Crimson replied, unstrapping herself.

“Freighter *Faceted*, repeat, this is Dyjillan Port Control,” Smada repeated, her voice becoming more vehement with each word. “You do not have authorization for departure. The authorities have been alert—”

Crimson jumped from her chair, backhanded the comm panel to silence the voice, and hit the deck running for the upper gun turret. Strapping herself in, she waved to her brother below her. She smiled and turned her attention to her targeting computer as the ship escaped Angjon’s atmosphere.

The freighter rocked as the TIEs screeched deftly past, lasers blazing. Kaj throttled the *Starlight Red* around, giving Crimson and Raider clear shots at their attackers.

One TIE immediately erupted into flames, which were just as quickly extinguished by the vacuum of space. “Got one!” Raider yelled, swiveling sixty degrees to get a bead on its wingman. As his targeting computer signaled a lock, the third TIE scored a hit on Raider’s turret, completely severing his gun-mount and raining sparks down upon him. “Frag!”

Crimson turned abruptly at the explosion and Raider’s curse. Spying the blackened transparisteel of the gun turret, she cried out, “Raine? You okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, flexing his fingers to soothe the effects of the mild shock he’d sustained. “But I’m not going to be much help to you from down here.”

Spinning in her gunner’s chair to strafe the attacking TIEs, Crimson tapped her headset. “Kaj, the lower turret’s scragged. Raine’s okay, but I don’t know how long any of us’ll stay that way with only one gun. You better do some fancy flying.”

Kaj’s stressed voice filtered back from the cockpit. “Just stay on the last two eyeballs, Red. I’ve got a plan.” He jerked the ship hastily in a zigzag pattern, avoiding the fighters. “Raider, get back to the cargo bay. The explosives in those crates of yours—they’d come in mighty handy about now. Pocket a few charges, grab yourself a vacuum suit, and head up to the top hatch airlock.”

“Vacuum suit?” Raider said. “What? I don’t—”

Crimson had no idea what Kaj was thinking but could almost see awareness dawning on her brother’s face...

“Wait—” Raider said. “I think I know what you’re getting at. I’m on it.”

As Raider sprinted down a corridor toward the bay, the *Starlight Red* shook hard. Explosions sounded from both sides of the ship. Sensors on Crimson’s targeting equipment told her that the TIEs had taken flanking positions.

Great, she thought. Shield generators gone. Even a minor hit now and we’re fireworks. “Kaj, they’re coming in from port *and* starboard. Get us out of here!”

With a suddenness that most sensible engineers would have deemed impossible for a ship of its class, the *Red* spun and turned on its axis, coming about 180 degrees with barely a decrease in speed. Klaxons wailed and steam fittings burst from the strain, a deep moan emanating from bulkheads never designed for such a maneuver. But the ship held together, thanks to modifications made by its previous owner.

Fighting back nausea as stars whipped by at dizzying speed, Crimson found herself facing both attacking ships. From the delay in their response, she recognized the stunned confusion of the pilots as they tried to locate their prey again.

For one TIE, the delay was fatal. Staccato bursts from the *Red's* upper gun turret reduced the fighter to space dust. The other ship stayed out of her targeting cone, dancing around the freighter like a frenzied Wistie.

Over her headset, Crimson heard Kaj's voice. "Okay, Crimson, get ready—wait for my instructions."

"All right," she answered non-confidently, hoping he knew what he was doing.

"Raider, you ready back there, buddy?"

"In position, Kaj. Just give the word."

"The word is... *Drop!*"

For a moment, it seemed to Crimson as though nothing had happened, but suddenly her sensors picked up the trail of an object off to port, apparently coming from the *Starlight Red* itself. The freighter spun around, placing the object between the two ships, then came to a full stop. Crimson's heart did the same. *What in space are you doing, Kaj? We're dead mynocks, sitting here like this!*

Seeing an opening, the TIE turned to make a final strafing run at its elusive prey.

"Stand by, Red," Kaj called. A couple of seconds went by, but it seemed like a lifetime. "Stand by... wait..." then he shouted, "Fire at that object off to port!"

You'd better be right about this, Kaj. As the TIE bore down on them, Crimson locked the slowly floating object in her sights, then opened fire. A brilliant explosion filled space before her, forcing her to shield her eyes with her hands. Looking back a moment later, she watched the TIE fly directly into the explosion. The starfighter erupted in a secondary detonation that was no match for the first, but was decidedly more satisfying to the occupants of the *Starlight Red*.

"That was a most effective and inspired demonstration of intuitive strategizing, Captain Nedmak. Quite impressive!"

Kaj grinned at the green-tinted protocol droid as it refilled his companion's mugs with raava. "Thanks, Uthre. It wasn't bad at that, if I do say so myself."

"Having Master Raider expel that megonite charge out the top hatch airlock for Mistress Crimson to detonate was certainly an unorthodox maneuver. However did you devise such an unusual offensive with such little planning?"

"Well, you said it yourself, Uthre: I'm inspired, intuitive, and impressive —guess you could say the 'i's have it!"

Crimson laughed, the first real laughter she'd enjoyed in weeks, due largely, she knew, to the relief of surviving the past few days.

Raider groaned and tipped back his mug, downing the contents in one long, smooth draught. "You know, Kaj, somehow your sense of humor seems so much better to me *after* I've doused myself in raava. Now, I wonder why that would be?" He winked at the smuggler, then signaled to U-THR for another refill.

Warm and giddy from her drink, Crimson slipped one arm around her brother, the other around Kaj. "Well, boys, here we are. We've made contact with the Rebel Alliance. I've found my long-lost brother. We've managed to track down—and escape with—some important cargo. The shields are fixed and we're traveling safely in circles on automatic. So what happens now?"

Raider grinned. "Now, dear sister, we make a delivery that is long overdue." Lifting the mug to his mouth, Raider took another long swallow. His green eyes sparkled mischievously as they drifted from Crimson to Kaj. "How do you two feel about snow?"

It was a quiet portion of the station, one of the few here on the Ring of Kafrene. Plenty of people were still walking through it, though, and Gregor Lojan stepped out from an alcove to join them. He casually strolled past the drop site, a rundown public terminal, with his gaze cemented straight ahead. Good. No one was watching. Most eyes were on a smudged viewport, as a formation of TIE interceptors flew past. Visitors, the Balasar thought. Real Ringers studiously ignored the patrols.

So far, so good. A few minutes later Lojan ducked into a side alley and unwound the bright blue sash from around his waist. A quick flip and its faded brown side was revealed, which he wound into a head scarf over his antennapalps. Pulling a pair of dust goggles over his eyes, he was now just another human, one nobody would remember seeing.

Lojan adopted a slight limp on the way back to the terminal, grasping the keyboard shelf as he sat. The disk was taped underneath, just like the briefing had said. He did some data searches to finish the ruse, then palmed the disk as he turned to move away.

"You there!" Lojan didn't need to turn to recognize the voice—those officious, self-important tones were also part of the briefing. Agent Kav Poen, part of Imperial security on the Ring. Lojan kept calm; there was always the chance Poen was after someone else.

An arm in white armor tried to grab him. Time to run. Lojan spun and used the thin keyboard to chop into the stormtrooper's vulnerable neck, then dashed into the nearest passageway.

Poen shouted commands for pursuit, and the twin replies meant there were two other troopers now on his tail. No blaster fire yet—either they wanted him alive, or they didn't want to damage the disk. That gave him a chance.

He burst into an intersection, where several other visitors—dressed too well for the Ring and almost showing off thick bags of credit chips—stood chatting. Hungry eyes watched them from darkened alcoves, waiting for the right time to pounce. Perfect.

He carefully made an awkward collision and lifted one of the bags, scattering the chips into the air. The lowlives burst out of the shadows and into a messy fight for the fallen credits. He sensed an approaching stormtrooper and dove into the scrum. With a daring grab Lojan pulled a vibroknife from the boot of one of scavengers and thumbed it active. The sideways, spinning throw he made wasn't among his best, but the balance on the heavy blade really was terrible.

He leapt over the still-twitching stormtrooper and sprinted down two more intersections, fast enough to avoid the startled security forces. Then there were suddenly two troopers blocking his way, and before he could dodge away four more were behind him.

Poen himself entered a moment later, panting. "Hah! We have you now!" Lojan kept silent as a trooper applied a heavy set of binders while the others kept their blasters at the ready.

"Indeed you do!" The ISB officer had appeared out of nowhere. Her uniform was immaculate, code cylinders precisely placed and her major's insignia glowing. She returned Poen's nervous salute and stared hard at Lojan. He tried to keep his expression steady, and hoped he was succeeding.

"Excellent work indeed" she continued. "The ISB has been looking for this one for some time now." Her smile was tight and cruel. "I believe his time with us will be quite...*unforgettable*." She glanced to Poen.

"A moment, though," the major said. She gave Lojan a curt kick, driving him to his knees. "Let's be sure the Rebel scum wasn't carrying anything else."

Lojan felt efficient hands searching him, and was about to bite down on a special tooth when a hushed voice in his ear said "*The Falcon Flies Furiously*." He hadn't heard that code in awhile, but knew it was for high level operatives. One of General Cracken's direct reports at Rebel Intelligence; possibly a sleeper working out of the Ring. He hadn't known she would be here, but that was the protocol for deep agents.

A small item was pushed into his palm—a Class 3 detonite microcharge, judging from the density and subtle but distinctive odor—as she finished the rough patdown. "Wait until I leave to escape," she whispered. "And do try not to get caught again." With that, she hauled him to his feet and made a show of hurling him at a stormtrooper. Lojan artfully stumbled, transferring the charge from his palm to inside his belt while drawing and palming a set of picks.

"Take him away, Agent Poen!" she ordered loudly, with perfect Imperial flair. A pair of stormtroopers grabbed Lojan and began marching him off. The others formed up around their prisoner, aggressively displaying their weaponry at anyone watching.

"Your assistance is most appreciated, Major," Poen replied, awe in his voice. He essayed another salute, sharper this time, then hurried to join his men.

"Not at all," Lojan heard over his shoulder as he was pulled along. "Always glad to help a fellow agent!"

He wished they would hurry things up a bit. Lojan needed to retrieve the disk from where he'd planted it back under the keyboard shelf, and then had an appointment back at Home Base for his next mission.

Your visions revealed nothing like this!" Codo Keburr yelled from behind cover. The Thisspiasian's serpentine body was not particularly well-suited for getting into tight spaces, but he was coiled as closely as he could manage behind a stone plinth.

"Visions are seldom precise," Killaen Chamat responded from where he had taken shelter. A blaster bolt blew apart a chunk of stone near the broad-shouldered Vurk's head, and he ducked reflexively.

Their companion, Omi Vass, peered around the edge of the pillar where she hid. The ancient droid that served as the guardian of this temple was larger than she'd ever seen—almost the size of an AT-ST. Its head nearly brushed the high vaulted ceilings of this chamber, and four arms, each tipped with a blaster, swept back and forth, searching for targets and shooting at their positions. *Perhaps in an attempt to frighten us into running from cover*, the young Tholothian thought.

Many things were possible through the Force, but Omi had seen too many false prophets in her time in the Outer Rim. Some offered hope in a dark time, but too many seemed to be selling their own brand of salvation, only to leave people empty-handed. She thought better of her friend, but cautiousness was a hard habit to let go.

Yet if this vision did prove true, a temple nestled deep within a canyon held the holocron they were searching for. After months of interpreting the signs in his vision, the three companions had narrowed the location down to Malian, a world in the Western Reaches. Their journey had led them here, straight into the arms of this massive droid. Whatever was hidden here was obviously valuable enough to be well protected, even after centuries had passed.

This is getting us nowhere. She had not traveled halfway across the galaxy to be thwarted by a walking museum piece. The prize within this temple, the knowledge that had been lost to time, had lain hidden here, waiting. They couldn't let some rusted protector stop them now.

"Codo! Killaen! When I leave cover, I need you to distract it!" Omi yelled.

"What are you going to do?" Codo sputtered.

Omi wasted no time on a response. She stepped purposefully from behind the pillar. Instantly, the ancient droid turned to face her, bringing its weapons to bear and opening fire. She dove back for cover as the air between the droid and the pillar blistered with torrents of blaster fire. Omi held her breath as clouds of dust and rocks flew from the pillar, which crumbled under the assault.

Over the roar of her shattering cover, sounds erupted of Codo and Killaen opening fire on the guardian droid. As she had expected, the droid turned its attention to them.

Now.

She stood and reached out with the Force. She saw the trembling pillar, clear in her mind, and there—the fracture caused by the droid's assault, weakening the structure.

Now.

The connection between herself and the pillar strengthened; the shape of it, the shape of the unworked stone it once was, the shape of what it would become, in her hands. The Force began to flow through her, and even as she concentrated, she marveled at the power at her fingertips.

Now.

She felt it happen before she heard the deep cracking sound, the fracture giving way, the pillar toppling, and yet not falling. It hung in the air, held there by her will. She heard someone cry out, and the shots of their blasters fell into silence. She was on her own now. A spike of fear shot through her, and she used it, sharpening her focus.

The pillar turned in the air, leveling forward until it pointed directly at the guardian. The droid had detected its presence and turned to face the floating stone, its systems trying to process what it was seeing.

NOW.

What had once been a pillar became a massive missile as Omi hurled it with every fiber of her being at the astonished droid. It struck the guardian construct dead on. Stone met metal, and metal gave way. In a shower of sparks, the droid that had stood watch for centuries was crushed under the weight of the pillar that had been there far longer.

Omi caught her breath, standing silently. She could still feel the shape of the pillar in her mind, the power and potential she had wielded, even as it now dissipated into memory.

"I did not know that you had such power in you," Killaen gasped. He walked towards Omi, half-supporting Codo, who clutched the oozing blaster burn in his side.

"Necessity makes many things possible," Omi explained. "I couldn't allow the droid to keep us from the holocron—or whatever other treasures it may have been guarding."

The wounded Thisspiasian coughed weakly, blood flecks appearing in his white beard. "Your efforts are appreciated. I didn't think we'd make it. I've never heard of anything like that droid being used in Jedi temples in the histories I've read."

She barely heard him, staring at the far end of the chamber where a small, pyramidal device sat on some sort of stone altar. She closed her eyes, imagining the secrets contained within it.

Omi Vass felt the weight of her lightsaber in her hand before she realized that she'd drawn the weapon. The blade leapt to life, bathing the chamber in a deep, crimson glow.

"Not every holocron belonged to the Jedi."



Age Of Rebellion: Fully Operational

So, what do you think?" Pon Kenti asked his former professor. The elderly scientist studied the holo floating between them as Kenti looked around her cluttered office. Padboards covered with hyperspace equations and engine designs still lined the walls like layers of insulation. Ellen Wune still here at work despite the lateness of the hour. Things didn't seem to have changed in the years since he'd last been here.

"My company monitors safety designs in upcoming engines," he explained, "and was puzzled by this device near the manifold." Kenti manipulated the small projector on her desk, and the holo of the hyperdrive schematic expanded into one section.

"Hmm." Wune's eyes narrowed. "Tighten on grids 34 to 36, then rotate four degrees along z-axis." The image zoomed in and twisted, showing a complex network of energy cables and ductwork. She examined it closely, using her stylus to follow lines in the diagram, then made some calculations on a pad.

"Whoever did this wasn't asleep in class. Like you were, evidently." She turned her gaze to Kenti. "It's clearly a cavitation shunt for Cronau radiation, to dampen emissions from hyperspace interactions. It also projects noise to fool sensors into thinking there was nothing but background e-m wash. Could make it tricky to detect ships reverting or jumping."

"But possible, though, right?" Kenti asked.

"Of course. You'd need someone really, really good though to calibrate the sensors, set up an active interference pattern too if you want to cancel out the noise." Wune said, staring directly at him. "Like me."

"Yes, well, that brings me to my next question..." he began, his voice rising with hope.

She spoke before he could get far. "A few comments first: it's obvious you're part of this so-called 'Rebel Alliance' we're not supposed to know about." Kenti started and looked to the open door with alarm.

"Sit still; no one else is in the institute at this hour," she continued. "Second: I remember you as a semi-competent engineer, which is a good thing as you're a terrible spy." She adjusted the holo, revealing markings along the sides of the image. "Next time, try not to leave the Imperial security stamps on the schematic. I'm pretty sure neither of us are supposed to see these designs and still be breathing, right?"

Kenti struggled to remember his planned speech. "Yes, and we want you to join us. It's vital that..."

"Vital for you, maybe, but not for me," she interrupted.

"Point taken, Professor." He tried to recover. "But you must see what's going on around us—why don't you want to take a stand against the Empire?"

"Why?" Wune asked in a bemused tone. "Judging from the competency displayed in this encounter, your little group doesn't stand a chance. If you want to go up against people who can blow up planets, be my guest."

"You're absolutely right, Professor. We don't have much of a chance. We're not professionals at running a rebellion. I'm certainly not a professional recruiter." Kenti paused and reached back for the voice he used when earnestly defending his thesis years ago. "But you can make us *better*."

She didn't reply, and he went on. "Be the scientist I remember, not the cynic. Observe and process the data. Project the outcome. If this goes on, do you think the Empire will tolerate any freedom at all for much longer?" He pointed at the holo. "What do you think it will do with this? Or the next weapon it creates? Is this what you want science to be about?"

Kenti tried to keep any momentum he had going. "I snuck in and watched some classes earlier. Disinterested students who don't care about learning to think for themselves. They're learning to *obey*."

"So? I'm getting paid either way." Wune settled in her chair. "I don't speak out. They let me do my research. I'm told it's too 'theoretical' for any practical applications," she said. "Not even for a rebellion."

"Possibly," Kenti replied. "But that's just part of what I remember you doing best. You like to foil things. You delight in finding how things can break. You've probably thought of a half dozen ways to defeat that shunt already, maybe even make it fail so it looks like it was never working correctly, right?"

She gave a slight smile, and he pressed on. "And I bet half of those would set back any future attempts by years and cripple any related lines of research. I also bet you'd enjoy destroying the careers of any Imperials involved as a nice bonus."

"So you want me to help sabotage the Empire's war effort?" Wune asked, clicking off the holo. "Derail its research efforts? Seems like a big job, Mister Kenti."

"Really? I also remember your ego, Professor Wune. We both know you wouldn't settle for anything less."

"You indeed know me so well." She reached behind her desk to pull out a valise. "I travel light," Wune added as his eyes widened. "Oh, I was ready to join before you came in; I just wanted to hear the pitch. I saw you watching my class earlier, clutching that projector so hard I thought it would break. You had seven other tells that gave you away. You really are a terrible spy—stick with engineering, dear boy."

The professor strode out of the office, speaking over her shoulder as he followed along. "So, Mister Kenti. I want a paper tomorrow on how *you* would recalibrate the sensors and also cause the shunt to suffer a rather explosive feedback failure. Make sure to show your work—class is back in session."

You sure know how to send an invitation, Koshka!" The duracrete wall sheltering Viktor Hel shook slightly, and dust flew free of the growing web of cracks near his head. Krandak slumped where Hel had dragged his unconscious body against the same wall, bleeding from a blaster wound, but probably alive. The Trandoshan had lived through worse. The "doctor" could patch himself up later.

"I didn't ask you to come here, Viktor." Koshka Frost dropped her depleted blaster rifle and pulled her pistol, then steadied her aim on the edge of the table giving her cover. "And I'm not sharing the reward when we take Melos in."

"I told you, I'm out of the game." Hel hurled a grenade over the edge of the crumbling wall.

"Naturally. Which is why you're here on Ord Mantell, hunting a deadly, Devaronian pirate hidden in a wretched nest crawling with guards, killers, and worse—competition." Frost set her shoulder against the heavy durasteel table and flared her jetpack, inching it forward to cut off the fire lane. Hel jumped behind table and opened fire with his rifle.

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't get yourself killed on this job. I still owe you one for last time. You know, when you hunted me half way across the galaxy and nearly burned my arm off.

"You were the one who threw that thermal detonator."

"But I threw it at you, so it's still your fault."

Hel grunted, leaned over, and grabbed Krandak as the duracrete wall finally gave in. The Trandoshan mumbled something about spinal fluid as Viktor dragged him to their new cover.

Blaster bolts rained against the table, and the group hunkered down to weather the storm.

"We're getting nowhere fighting these other hunters, Vik. Time to change tactics. You've always been good at sniffing out trouble, or at least plunging headlong into it. Go find Melos. I'll take care of things here."

"By take care of things, you mean..."

"I mean leave me your weapons."

Hel grumbled and unholstered a pistol, two knives, a few assorted grenades, and several spare clips. "I'm drawing the line at the rifle, though."

Hel could hear the carnage beginning as he ran, but he didn't look back. Getting killed by a stray blaster bolt during his mentor's moment of glory was hardly befitting of the infamous Viktor Hel, after all.

Usually, most of bounty hunting was shockingly unglamorous—asking shopkeepers for sparse details, poring old receipts, sitting on stakeout waiting for anything to happen. Nothing like the holovids. Unfortunately, from the minute Krandak had showed up at Hel's speeder shop and dropped Frost's name, his life had been altogether too exciting. The hunter swept his rifle's the sight across the landscape from his vantage point atop a low hill of rubble. A glimmer caught his eye. A camp, several days old, sheltered by the shattered husk of a skyscraper. His mark's location.

"Found you, Melos."

"Heh, heh. Well now, who did you find?"

Viktor turned his gaze to the heavy blaster pistol pointed at his head, and the Sullustan holding it. The Sullustan's colorful poncho flapped slightly in the breeze, and he tipped his hat with his free hand.

"You sure you want to point a blaster at Viktor Hel, friend? I've got a bit of a reputation." A reputation that was almost, but not quite, entirely unearned—not that Hel was going to bring that up.

The Sullustan gave his dry laugh again. "Viktor Hel, huh? Never killed anyone famous before."

Hel weighed his options. "Hey, I have a better idea..."

Viktor slipped out from the shadow of the building, an unconscious Devaronian slung over his shoulder. The clomp of heavy boots came from behind him. He looked back briefly... and found himself facing a blaster.

"Viktor!" Koshka's tone didn't quite reach surprise.

"Koshka! We got Melos, but we need to go!"

The Sullustan rounded the corner, pistols drawn, and the pair quickly flicked up to target both of the other hunters. Without dropping her pistol, Frost hefted her rifle into place with one arm to aim at the Sullustan.

"Before you two shoot each other and also me, let me make introductions. Koshka Frost, Nom Lumb. Koshka, Nom helped me take down Melos' guards, so I cut him in for one-fifth."

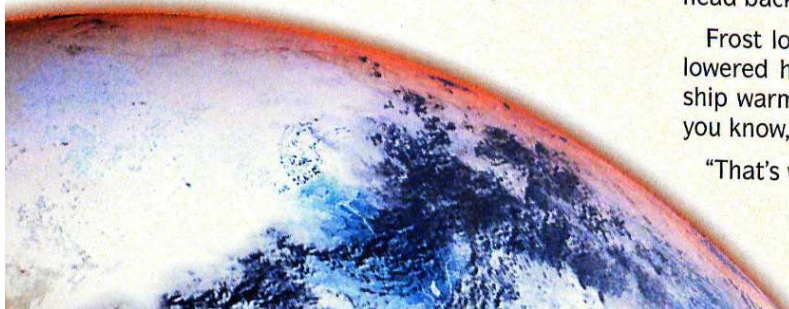
"You always were a terrible negotiator, Viktor."

"He had a gun to my head! One-fifth is a bargain!"

Lumb holstered his pistols. "So, we going? Hel said your ship's nearby. I need a ride off this rock, since my former, uh, associates aren't gonna be happy about my cutting them out." He jerked his head back the way they had come.

Frost looked at Hel and Lumb appraisingly, then lowered her weapons. "Your good 'doctor' has the ship warmed up. Let's be going." She paused. "But you know, Vik, you haven't lost your touch."

"That's what I'm afraid of."



Force & Destiny: Knights Of Fate

A pair of hulking guards flanked an enormous durasteel door, shiny blasters cradled in large, clawed hands. A tarnished pyramid towered behind, dwarfing the surrounding scrap-metal shelters and rickety stalls. Ark ol Loor was much too near her goal to let these two Dowutins deter her, despite the inner protests of her Orucyte half.

"You sure you want to go in there?"

Surprised to hear the words aloud, she spun to face the old human from the transport. She dropped her fists, relaxed her muscles. The man smiled, his face wrinkled like a dried fruit. He didn't mean her harm. She couldn't sense him—he wasn't a Phydolon—but she knew.

"Leave me alone," Loor warned. "Stay out of my business."

She turned her back on him and plodded toward the guards. One raised a hand to stop her.

"Members only," he growled.

"I'm meeting someone. Please, what will it cost me?"

She knew the guard was going to attack before he did, and her pulse quickened. The Dowutin raised his arm to strike but she was already moving, ducking under the blow, bringing her elbow up. She caught him hard between his tusks, but he barely blinked. She felt the anger rising around her, smothering, as the guard raised a blaster.

Loor launched herself at the Dowutin as one of his knobby claws pulled the trigger, and she lashed out with her long arm, spoiling his aim. The blast hit the other guard, who fell against the door and slid to the ground. She darted for the fallen guard's blaster, but large claws caught her by the neck, dragging her back.

She threw herself against him with all the strength her long limbs could muster, knocking his head back against the door. As his grip loosed, she ducked away and snatched up the fallen blaster, whipping around to take a shot. The huge body fell, sprawled across his comrade.

The subsiding cloud of anger left her cold, and she took deep breaths even as the fungal fibers lacing her body replenished the oxygen in her blood. Pushing the blaster into her belt and concealing it under her coat, she stepped over the bodies and pushed through the door.

Loor took long strides down a flight of dark steps. The room at the bottom was gloomy, lit only by a red glow rod twisted around the length of the bar and a few luminous drinks on the tables. The hushed conversations and tension in the air told her she was expected.

A battered service droid waited behind the bar, watching her with its one intact visual sensor.

"I'm looking for the Executioner," Loor said. "Is he here?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," the droid said, its tinny voice grating. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Why do you target this bounty hunter?"

It was the old man again, sliding onto a stool at the bar like he was a regular. His plain brown robes couldn't have looked more out of place.

"He is just a tool. If you kill him, another will take his place."

"What do you know?" she asked flatly.

"I know he is here, and that the service droid has just alerted him to your search."

He was right. The droid, holding a tray of drinks high, had rolled to a table across the room. A figure rose: horned, red skin, scarred face, just as described. Malice radiated from the Devaronian in waves as he strode toward her, taking a sniff of some stimulant.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, looking her up and down as he smirked, flashing his incisors. He stank of sulphur, which nearly turned her stomach, but she remained still. Her hand rested on the weapon under her coat.

"You're the Executioner?" she asked.

He nodded.

"You don't just execute your targets, though, do you?"

He laughed, and she raised the blaster, but not fast enough. One big arm hugged her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides, and a clawed hand tugged the weapon from her grasp—another Dowutin.

"What's it to you?" the Devaronian asked, still smiling. "Did I hurt someone you cared about? Do tell."

Loor wanted him to understand, but nothing she could say or do would make him feel the pain she felt. These aliens—they stood alone, cut off. That was why they could inflict suffering on others and not care. When this bounty hunter took Alk ol Nojj's lives, he very literally killed a part of Loor.

"Yes," she replied simply. She tensed, ready to die but determined to take the Executioner with her.

"Let her go."

It was the old man. He moved to stand between her and the bounty hunter, looking above her at the Dowutin who held her. The grip around her loosened.

"Hold her!" the Executioner said, and the grip tightened again. "And you, get out of my way."

The Executioner tried to throw the old man aside, but the human took hold of his arm, flipped him over, and sent him crashing into the far wall.

"You can make a difference, save lives, ease suffering," the old man said, leaping over her head. Her captor fell with a thud. "But you must choose your battles more carefully."

Loor turned to see him tossing the massive Dowutin, more than twice his size, across the bar.

"How did you do that?" she asked in her typical monotone.

"You can fight without exposing your identity," he continued, ignoring the question. He raised a hand as the Devaronian charged. The human pushed his hand out, and—though it never connected—the bounty hunter went crashing through a table, breaking it in two.

"Or betraying what you are," he said.

"What I am?" she asked. "What do you know of what I am?"

The old man smiled. "Let me teach you what you are."

THE HIDDEN

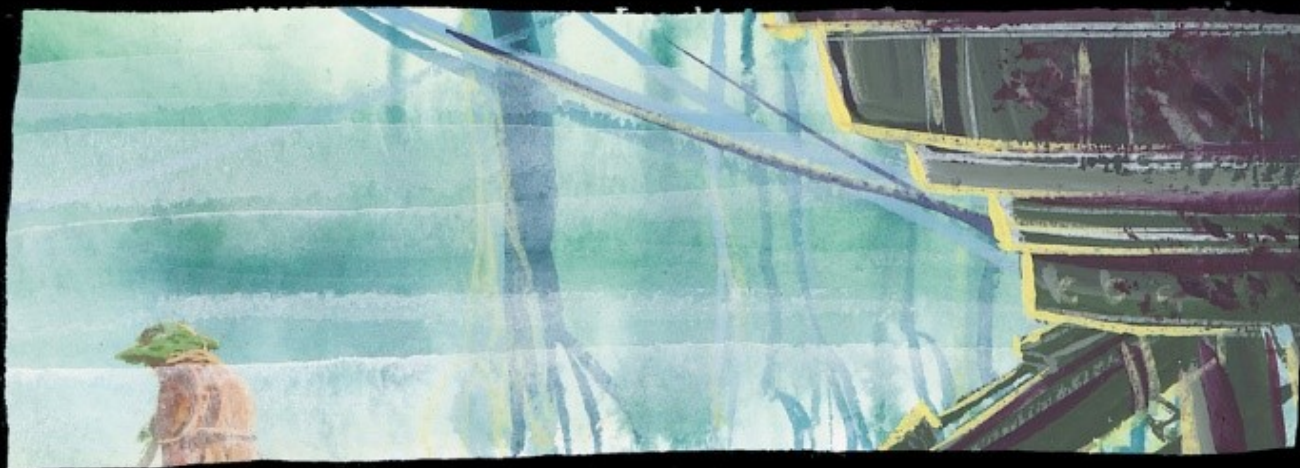


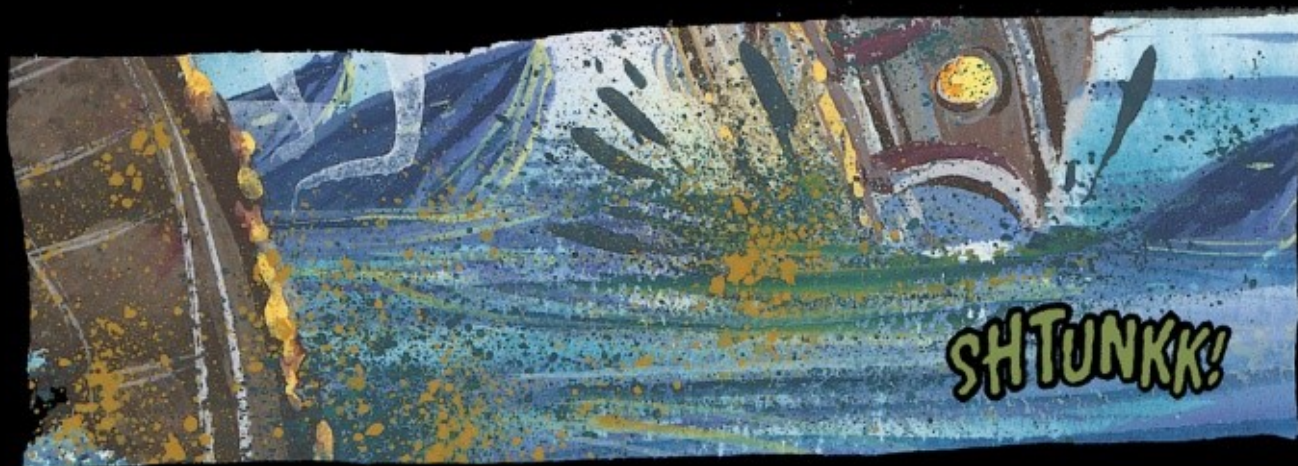
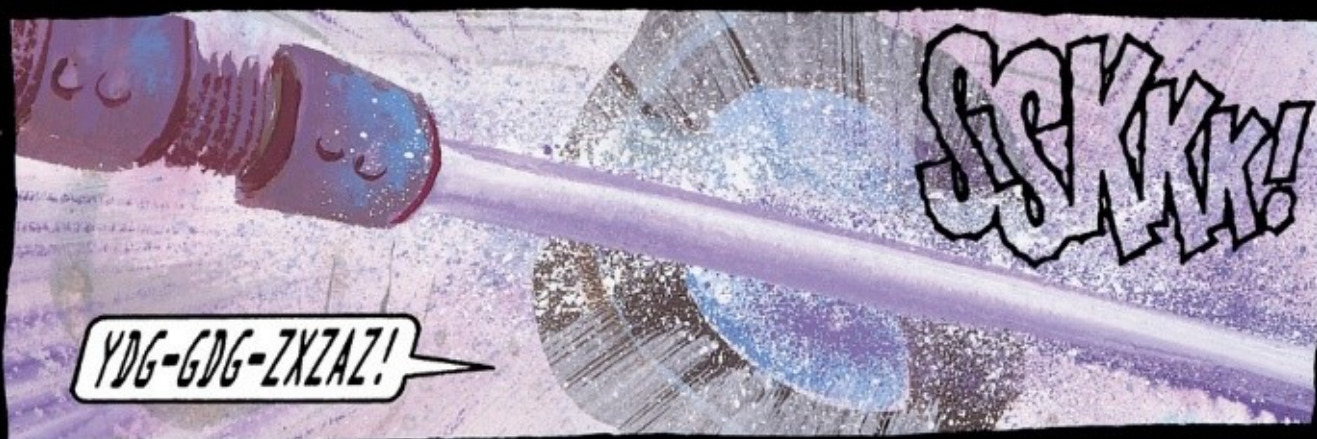
SPLASH!













ZZHH
ZSHH



SHZZNNNNNZZSHHKK



ADMIRAL,
SIR!

I THOUGHT YOU
SHOULD KNOW... WE'VE
RECEIVED A TRANSMISSION
FROM ONE OF OUR PROBE
DROIDS IN THE
DAGOBAH SYSTEM.

IT WAS SENT
ON A PRIORITY
BAND, AND THE DROID
WAS DESTROYED
SHORTLY
THEREAFTER.

SHOW
ME.



THE PLANET'S DENSE ATMOSPHERIC
CONDITIONS HAVE CAUSED INTERFERENCE
WITH OUR TRANSMITTERS IN THE PAST.

HOWEVER, THIS IS
WHAT I FOUND MOST
INTRIGUING...



Renegade Flight

Building a Rebel base is difficult enough — keeping it supplied can sometimes be impossible. Assigned to the ever-mobile Alliance High Command Headquarters, Renegade Flight escorts any transport and cargo vessels bound for the most important of Rebel bases.

Renegade Flight is one of the oldest starfighter groups in the Alliance. It is named for the Incom design team that defected to the Rebellion early in the Civil War. Military lore has it that one of its fighters dates back to the original X-wing prototypes, but this is yet to be confirmed.

Renegade Flight was led by Commander Narra, a

veteran pilot nicknamed "Boss" by other members of the squadron. Narra and his skilled droid tactician, K-3PO, devised a stunning tactic that won the Battle of Ton-Falk. From this battle, in which the Empire suffered due to lack of starfighter support, Imperial tacticians developed the escort carrier.

The Empire had final revenge in orbit around Derra IV. Renegade flight was escorting a group of transports destined to Echo Base. The Imperials hypered in on the far side of Derra IV, using an escort carrier to disgorge dozens of TIE fighters. The transports were destroyed. All in Renegade Flight were killed.

Meltdown On Hoth

R2-D2 and C-3PO, two of the Rebellion's most heroic droids, worked alongside the Rebels at Echo Base. As personal servants of Luke Skywalker and Rebel leader Princess Leia, they were usually in the thick of the action. R2-D2 loved the excitement! C-3PO, however, was a worrywart.

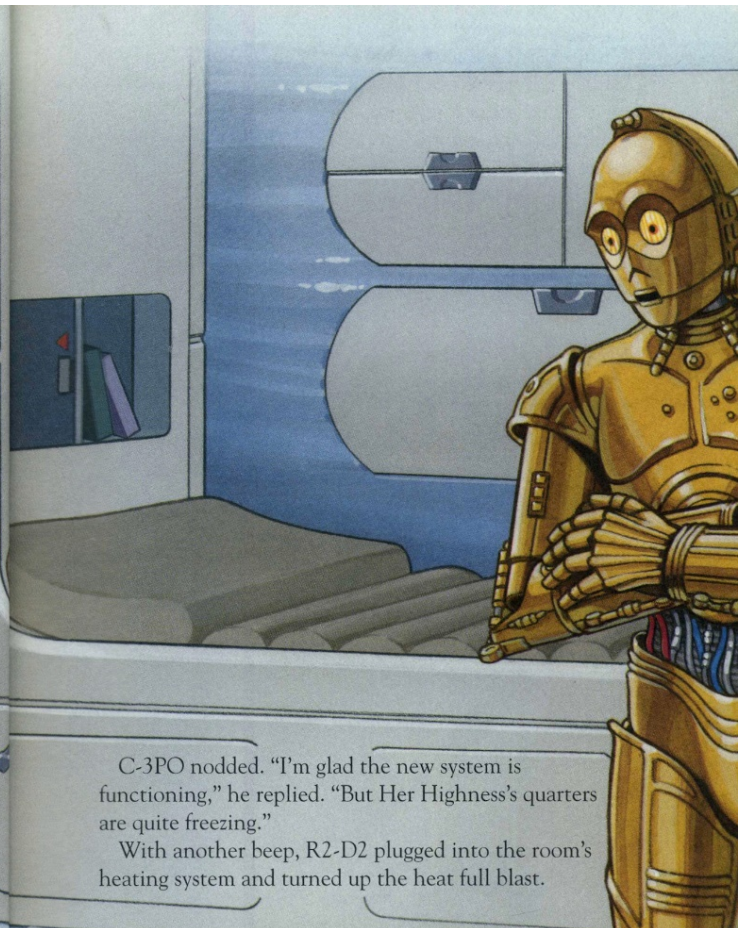


One morning Princess Leia asked R2-D2 and C-3PO to install a new communications unit in her sleeping quarters. "BlurbEEP, zEEP," R2-D2 whistled happily when the new unit was up and running.



C-3PO nodded. "I'm glad the new system is functioning," he replied. "But Her Highness's quarters are quite freezing."

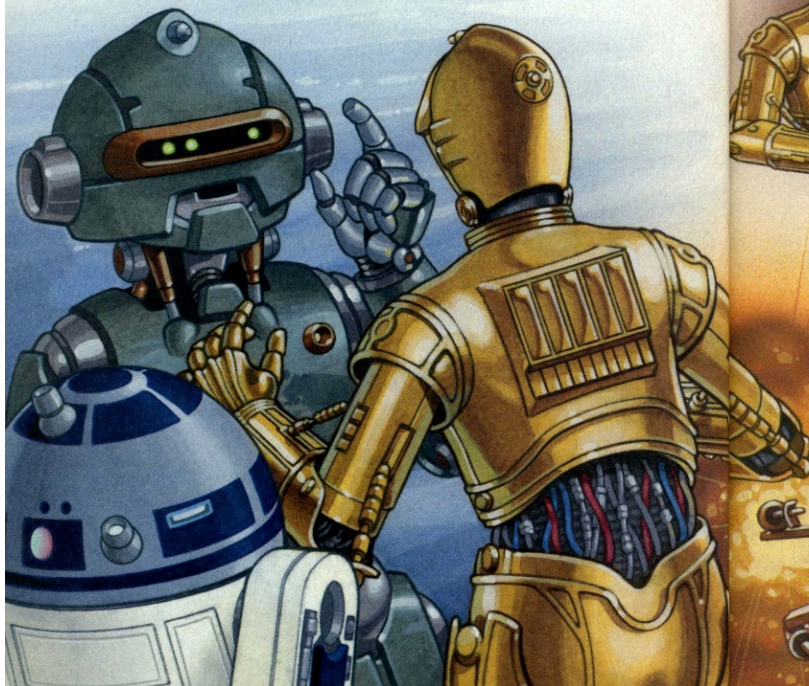
With another beep, R2-D2 plugged into the room's heating system and turned up the heat full blast.



On the way back to the command center, R2-D2 and C-3PO ran into the pesty Coordinator Droid. He loved to give them minor jobs to do.

"Unit R2-D2 reassigned to cavern drilling operations," the Coordinator Droid announced. "Unit C-3PO reassigned to communications center."

"ZEEP, blurb-beep!" R2-D2 whistled angrily.



"Now see here!" C-3PO exclaimed. "R2-D2 and I are personal servants of Commander Skywalker and Princess Leia.



We delivered the Death Star plans to Obi-Wan Kenobi!
We fought in the battle of Yavin! We are NOT here to complete your silly tasks!"





“Data not relevant,” the Coordinator Droid droned.

“You rusting bureaucrat!” C-3PO exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air. “Why, we have probably just saved Princess Leia again. If we hadn’t turned the heat up in her quarters, she might have frozen!”

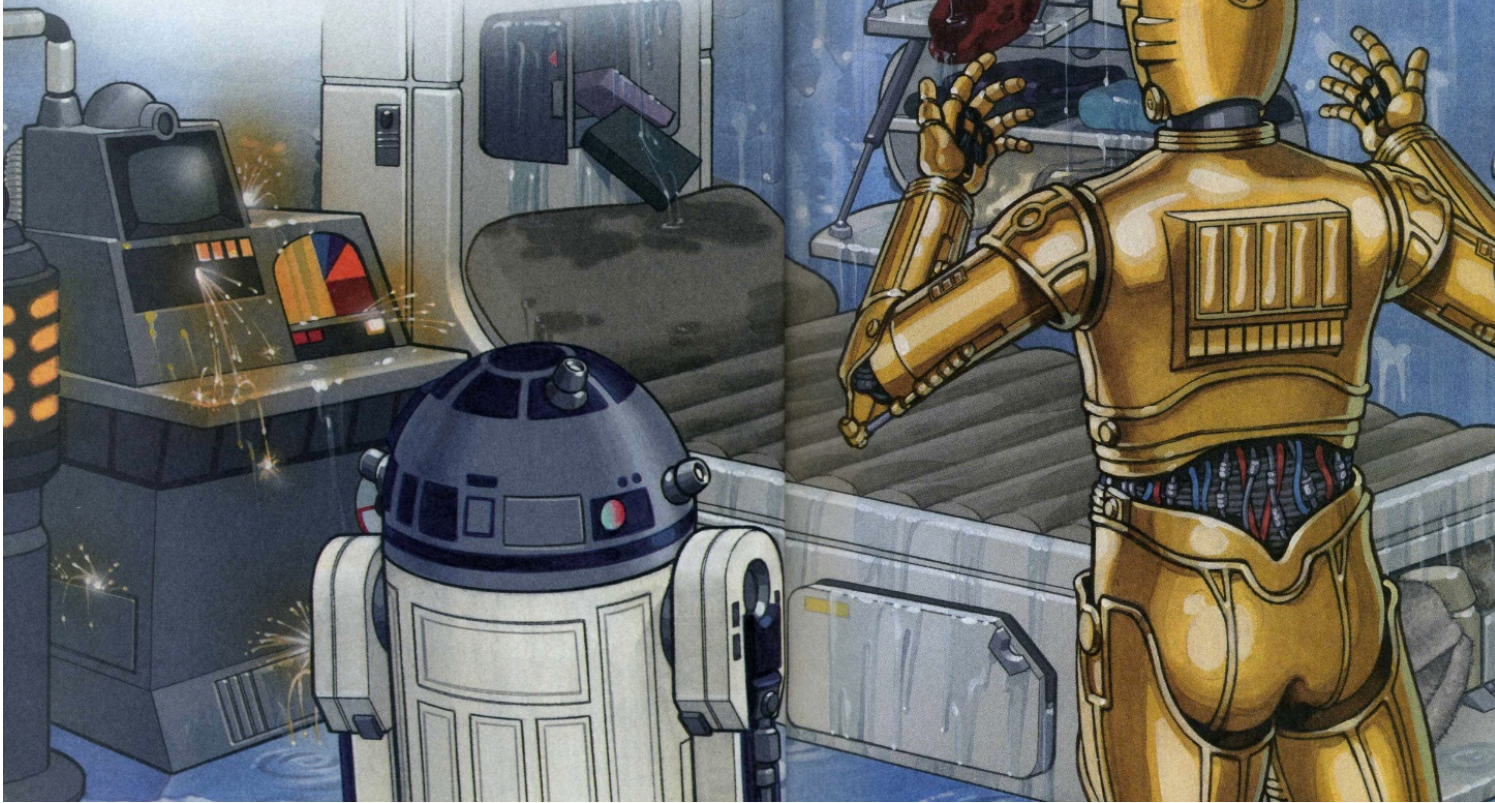
With that, R2-D2 and C-3PO turned around and hurried back down the corridor—until they felt something strange under their feet. A large puddle of water had gathered on the floor outside Princess Leia's quarters!

"Oh, dear," C-3PO told R2-D2. "I think you may have turned up the heating system a little too high. . . ."



The droids quickly entered the room. It was a shambles! The walls had begun to melt and water was everywhere—on the floor, dripping down the walls, even on the bed! And worst of all, the new communications unit was shorting out!

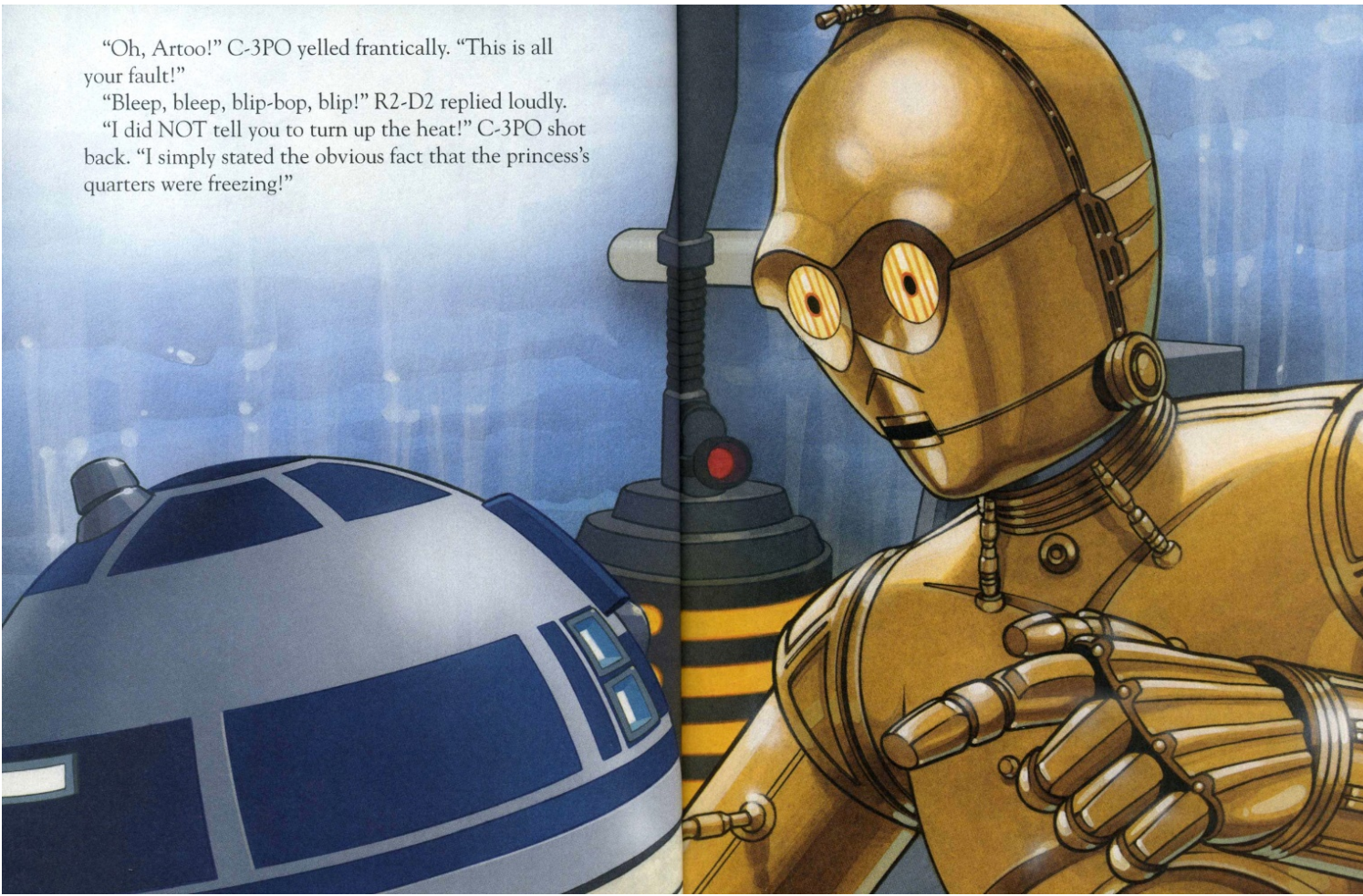
“We’re doomed!” C-3PO cried.



"Oh, Artoo!" C-3PO yelled frantically. "This is all your fault!"

"Bleep, bleep, blip-bop, blip!" R2-D2 replied loudly.

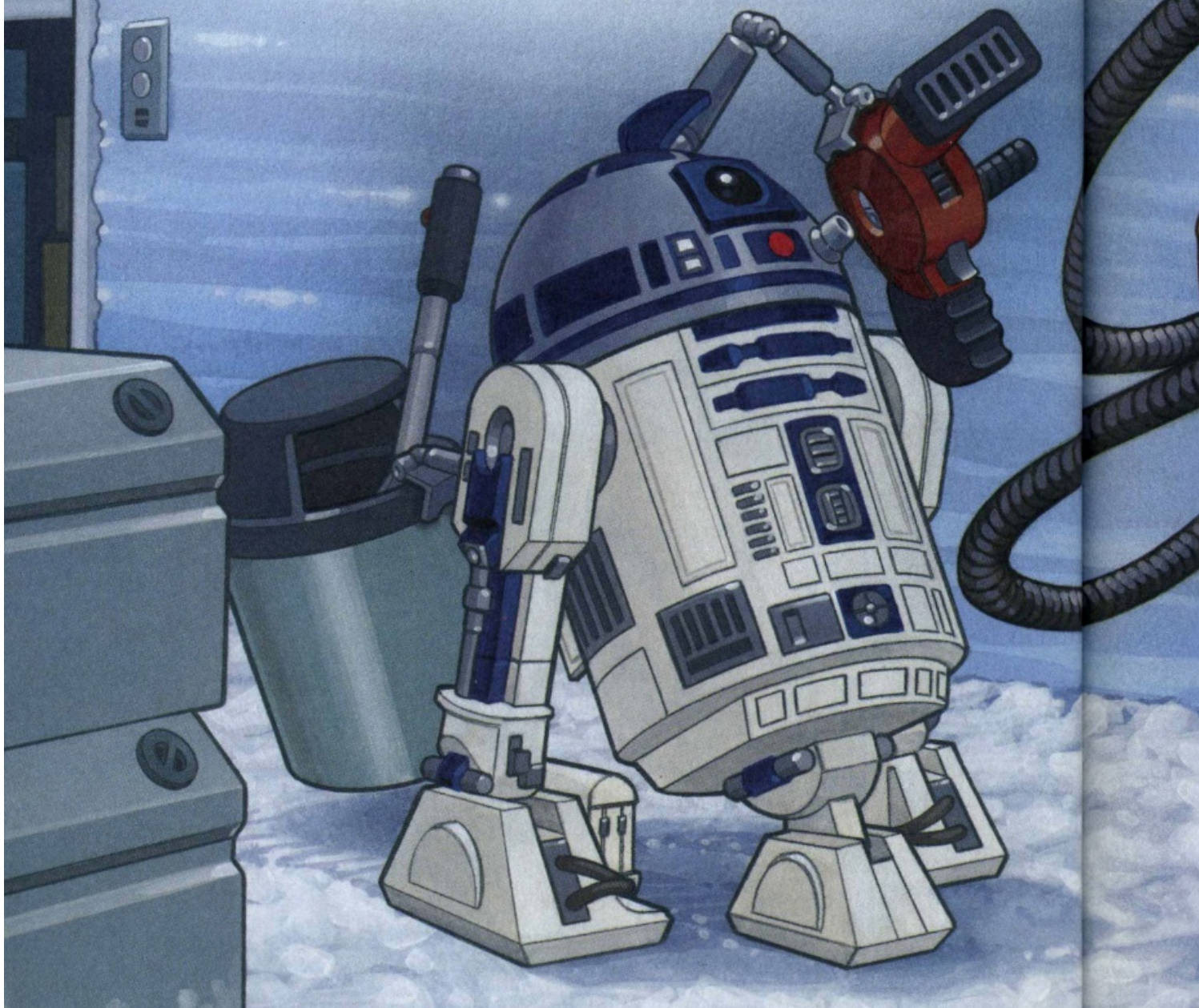
"I did NOT tell you to turn up the heat!" C-3PO shot back. "I simply stated the obvious fact that the princess's quarters were freezing!"



Still bickering, R2-D2 and C-3PO headed down the hall to the supply station.

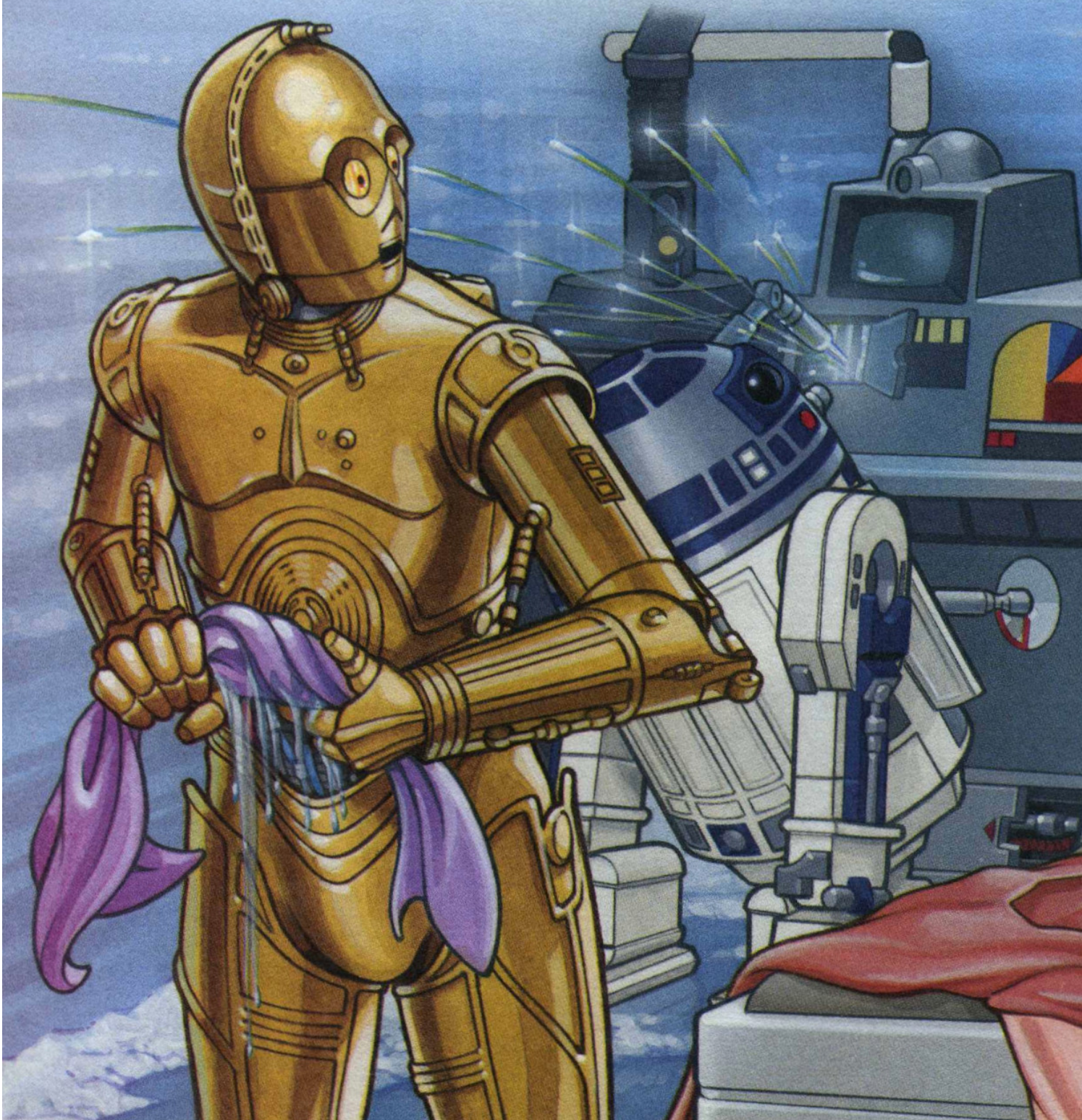
“Zip, rip, bleeeeeep!” R2-D2 exclaimed.

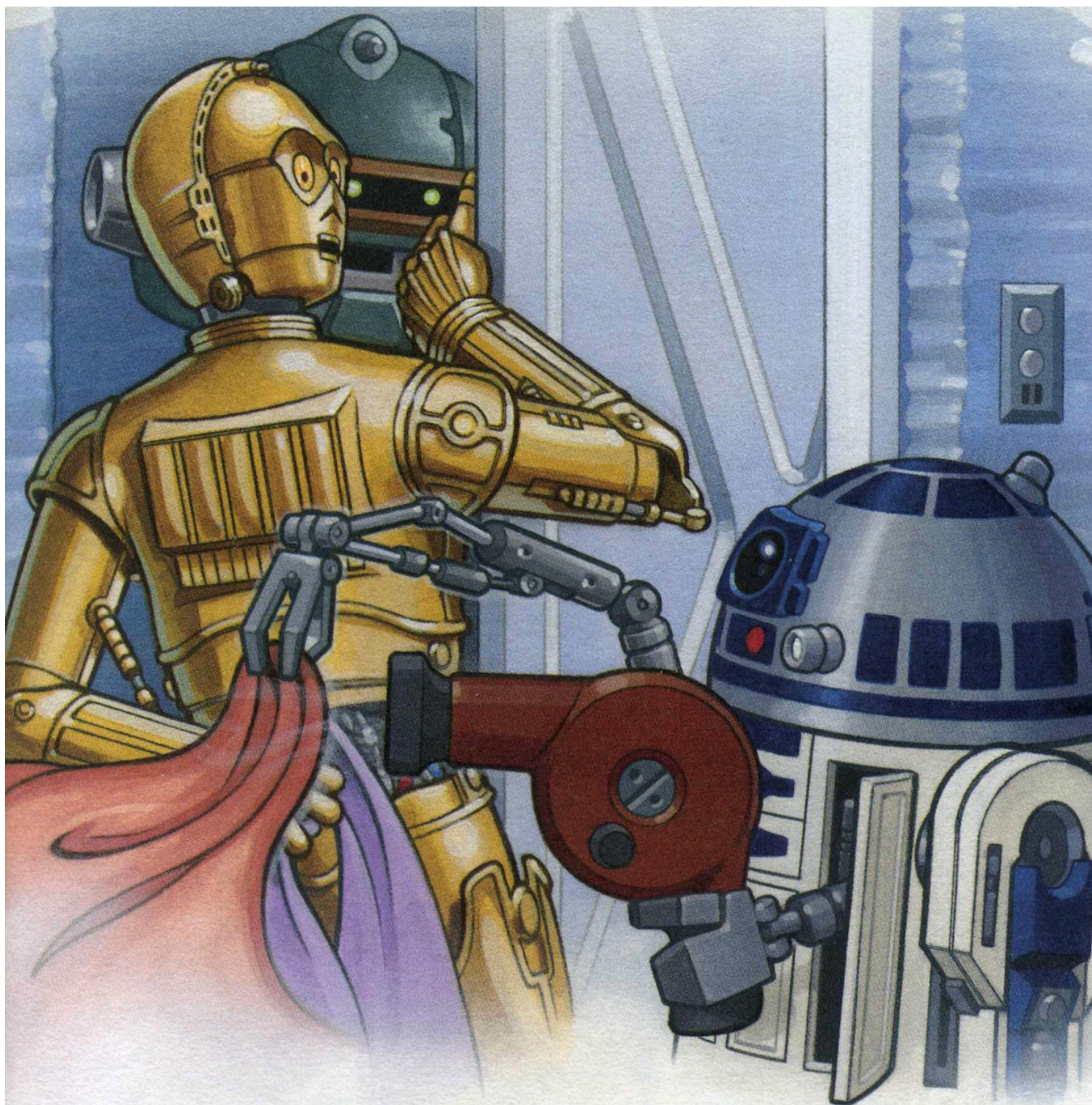
“Don’t insult me, you technical scrap heap!” C-3PO replied as they raced back to Leia’s quarters armed with cleaning supplies.



The droids quickly got to work. While C-3PO wrung out Princess Leia's clothes, R2-D2 worked on the communications unit. Soon a shower of sparks was flying across the room!

C-3PO flew into a panic. "Be careful, Artoo!" he shrieked. "I'm going to short-circuit!"





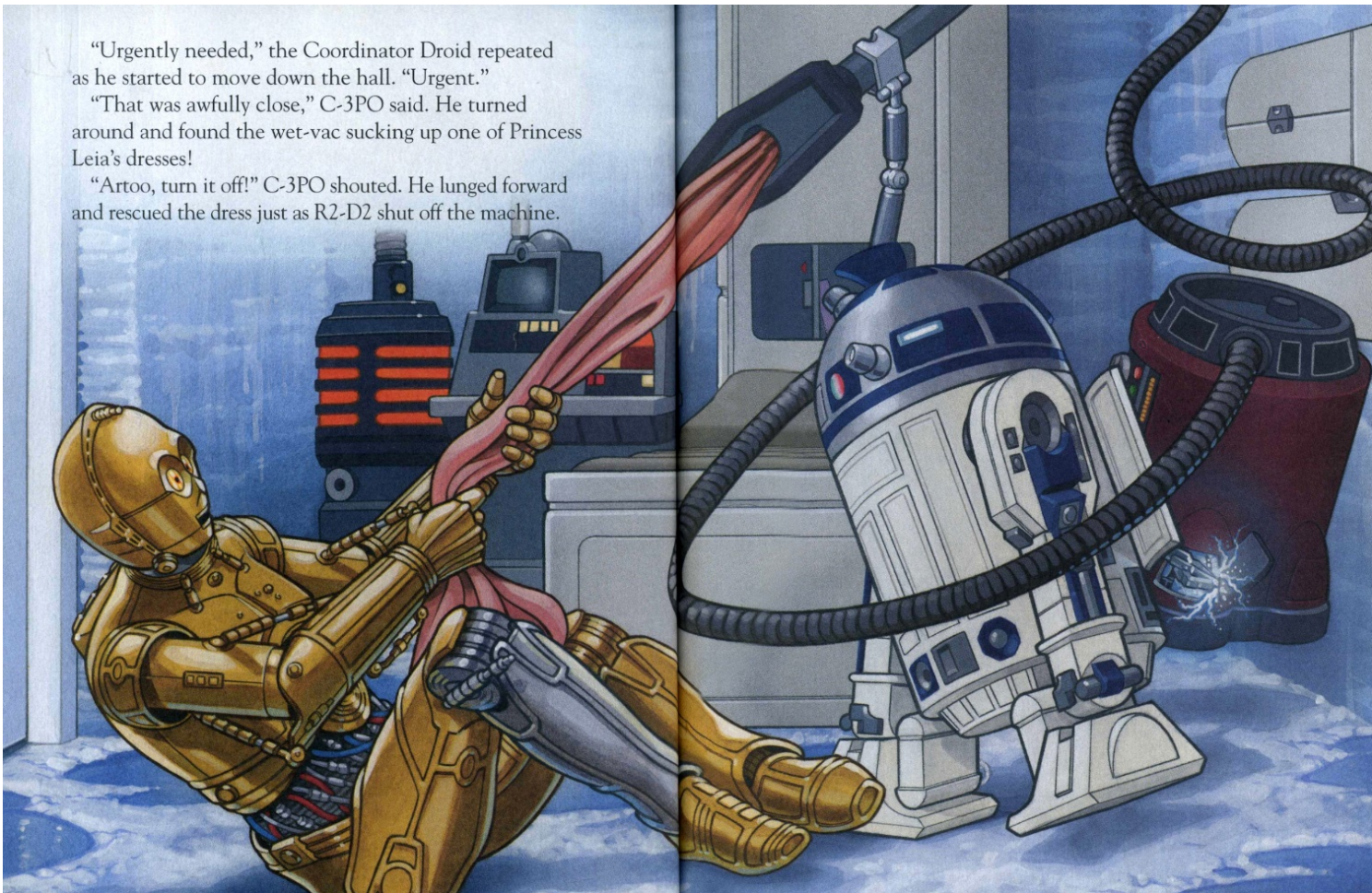
Suddenly there was a knock at the door. “Power fluctuations detected in Princess Leia’s quarters,” a mechanical voice said. “Need to check status.” It was the Coordinator Droid!

“Mistress Leia’s quarters are in order,” C-3PO answered, hurling himself against the door. “And I’ve just received word that you are urgently needed in the command center.”

"Urgently needed," the Coordinator Droid repeated as he started to move down the hall. "Urgent."

"That was awfully close," C-3PO said. He turned around and found the wet-vac sucking up one of Princess Leia's dresses!

"Artoo, turn it off!" C-3PO shouted. He lunged forward and rescued the dress just as R2-D2 shut off the machine.



Exhausted, C-3PO collapsed onto Princess Leia's bed. "I don't know how we're ever going to survive this," he moaned.



"Survive what?" asked a voice from the doorway. Bolting upright, C-3PO found himself looking at Princess Leia!

"Your Highness," he mumbled, "I'm terribly sorry. . . ."

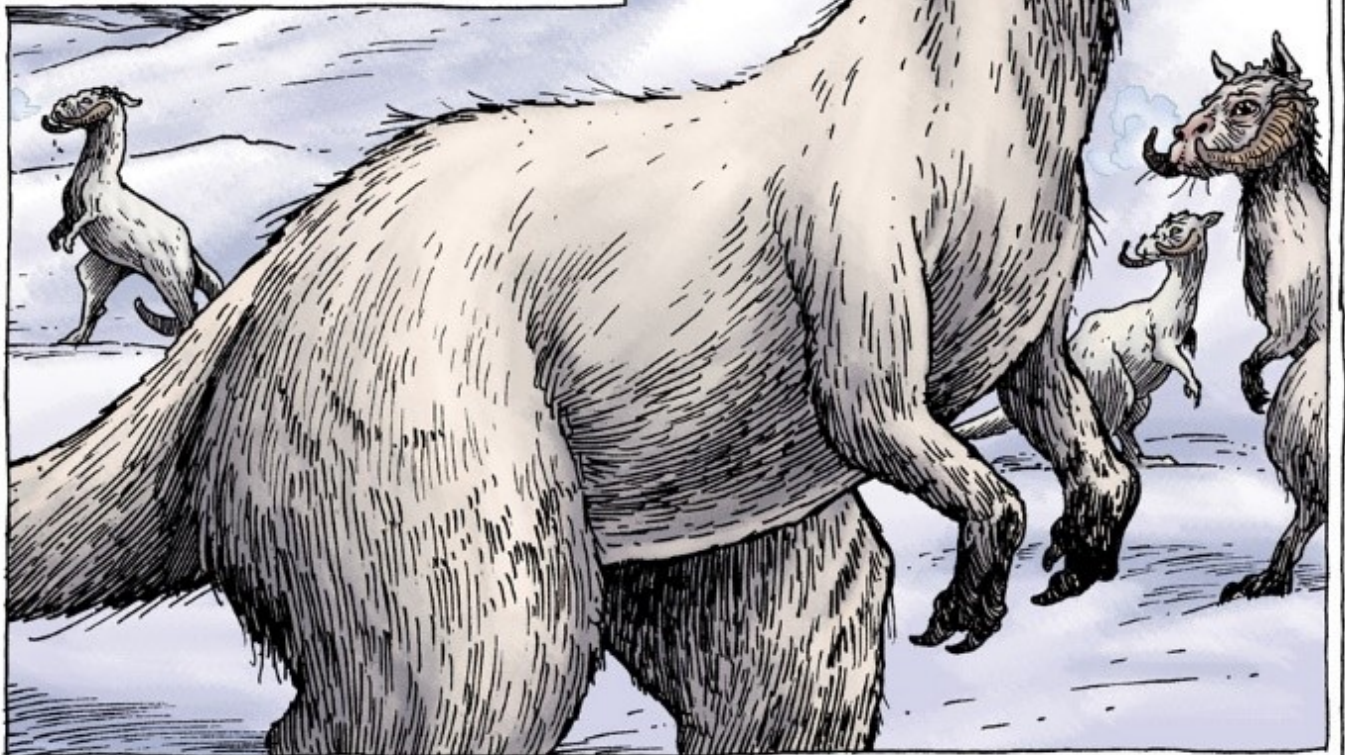
"You've cleaned my room!" Leia interrupted with a smile. "Thank you!"

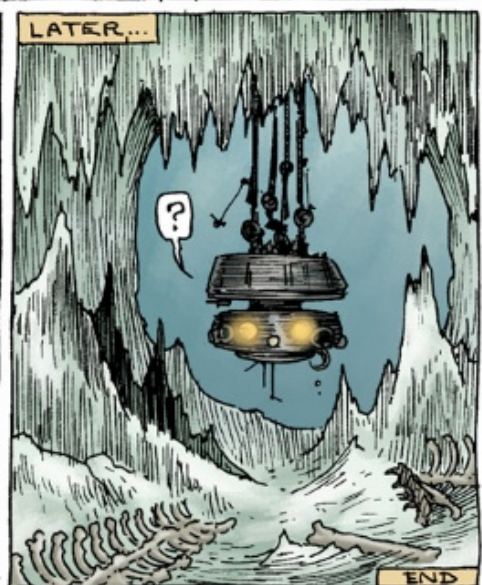
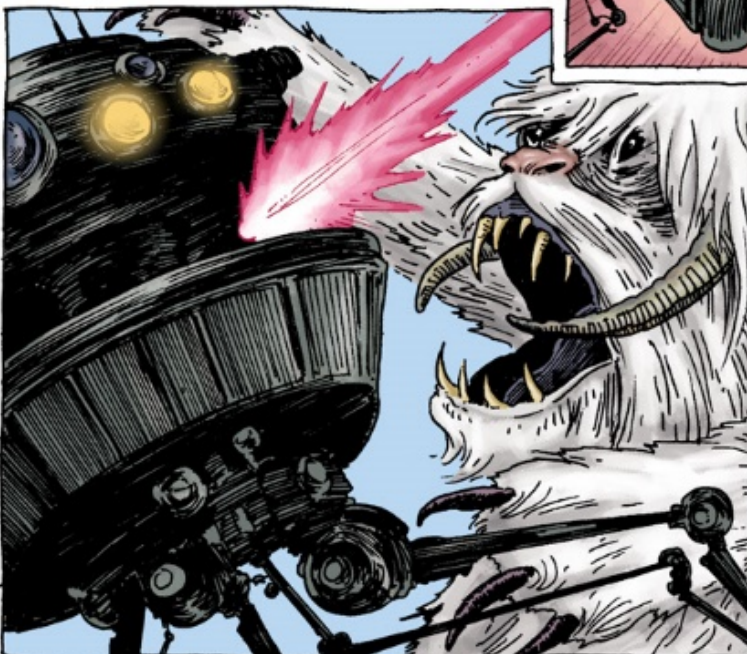
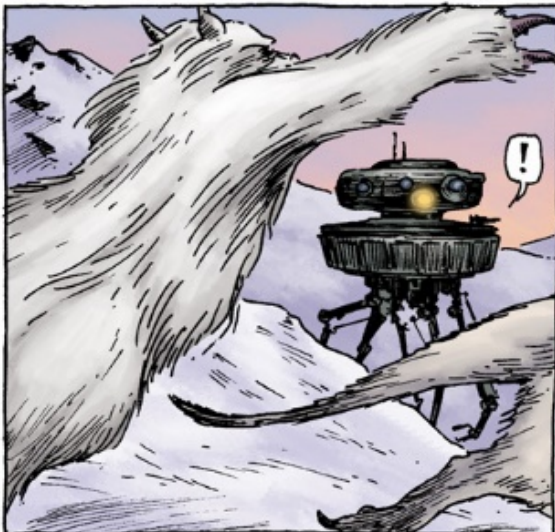
“Zeep, bleep, wur, meep!” R2-D2 whistled happily.
“You’re welcome, Your Highness,” C-3PO replied,
heaving a sigh of relief. “We thought you might
appreciate it!”



HOTH

DAWN ON THE ICE PLANET HOTH,
A HERD OF WILD TAUNTAUNS GRAZE
ON LICHEN BY A FROZEN LAKE...





Rebel Force: Uprising (epilogue)

The world was white. Snowflakes swirled in gusts of icy wind. The ground lay buried far beneath a thick layer of snow and ice. As the sun dropped beneath the horizon, the temperature dropped well below freezing. By day, the planet Hoth was only barely habitable; at night, it was a dead zone. There was no shelter from the snow, no refuge from the raking winds. It seemed impossible anything could survive such wintry torment. And yet, two creatures stumbled blindly through the frozen landscape.

One rode a tauntaun, prodding the weary animal to take one more step, and yet another, and another. The cold bit into him with sharp teeth, but he pushed on, scanning the horizon for any sign of life.

Several kilometers of snow and ice lay between him and what he sought. A lone man, crawling through the snow, losing strength by the second. Soon his limbs grew too numb to move, and he collapsed facedown in the snow.

A third figure watched them both. A figure unbowed by the wind. A figure that was draped only in a thin, brown robe, and yet did not feel the cold.

He had been watching for a long time, watching and waiting.

But now, that time had ended.

The time for action was upon him.

Han Solo was steering his tauntaun the wrong way. If he continued on his course, he would lose himself in the blizzard and never find his way back to Echo Base. While Luke would lie helpless in the snow, growing weaker and weaker, until he finally succumbed to the cold.

Obi-Wan reached out with the Force. Using the Force was different now, beyond the grave. He was stronger and weaker at the same time. In many ways, he was the Force. It animated his spirit, gave him this strange half-life-but it also separated him from the living world. He couldn't save Luke himself. But he could help Han.

Just a few degrees to the east, and a bit to the south, and Han would be on a direct course to his friend. It was little more than a gentle nudge in the right direction. Han trusted his instincts-Obi-Wan was only giving those instincts a bit of help. Whether Han would be able to keep Luke alive and get him back to the base, Obi-Wan couldn't know. But he had faith in both of them. He'd never seen such strong wills to survive.

It was time. Han would find Luke soon, and before he did, there was something Obi-Wan needed to say.

"Luke," Obi-Wan said, materializing before him.

There was no response. Had he waited too long?

"Luke," he said again, louder.

Luke raised his head. "Ben?" he asked weakly, his eyes widening.

There was so much Obi-Wan would have liked to say, but there was little time. "You will go to the Dagobah system," he said.

"Dagobah system?" Luke sounded confused. It was not surprising. Very few humans had ever heard of Dagobah-it was one of the reasons Yoda had stayed safely hidden for so long.

"There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me."

Luke didn't understand, but he soon would. Obi-Wan had no doubt the young Jedi would follow his instructions and find his way to Dagobah-and there he would find Yoda, and his training could finally begin. Obi-Wan had watched the boy for three years, waiting to be sure that he was strong enough to learn the Jedi way. That he wouldn't be tempted to the dark side. That he was not another Anakin. Obi-Wan knew he shouldn't blame himself for the rise of the Empire-the rise of darkness-but he still bore the guilt.

He refused to release another such evil on the galaxy. And so he had waited, and waited, desperate to be sure.

But he had finally come to accept: You could never be sure.

You could only hope; you could only believe. He had come to know Luke well these past years, and he knew that Luke was no Anakin. He was his own man, strong enough to take on the burden and gift of being a Jedi. The training would be difficult, and there would be many temptations along the way. Luke would hear the call of the dark side... but Obi-Wan believed the boy would resist. And once Yoda had the chance to know Luke, Obi-Wan was sure he would agree.

Trust your instincts. Trust the Force. Words he had learned from his Masters, repeated to so many Padawan, to so many fallen friends.

He was finally ready to follow his own advice.

As Han Solo appeared on the horizon, Obi-Wan allowed himself to fade away. It was only a matter of time now. Luke would survive to fly to Dagobah. He would train. He would learn. Soon, he would be ready. The Jedi would return. And the fight for the galaxy could truly begin.

The Horror By Night

From the data-journal of Voren Na 'al.

I tell you this story in my own words, for I was there, in the frozen caves of ice, living that nightmare along with the rest of the men and women at the Hoth base. I think the main reason for the incident being so frightening to the people involved was that it came without warning. Markers had been placed, kilometres of territory scouted, and a blanketing sensor array set up, but all the signs were the same. Aside from the few passive Tauntauns we encountered, or the occasional Snowmouse, there were no life forms on this Force forsaken planet. Or so we thought.

With this in mind, a feeling of security seemed to settle over the people of Echo Base. Everything had gone almost flawlessly so far, and aside from the frigid elements of this world, there seemed to be very little danger. Perhaps it was this feeling of security that caused the abandonment of some of the usual safety precautions. Standard Operations Procedure dictated that mounted scouts were to be sent out in pairs, so that they might be better prepared in case of unforeseen danger. But the lack of any apparent danger soon had scouts traveling by themselves. They reasoned that they could cover twice the territory this way.

The first sign of trouble came when Commander Skywalker failed to report in after placing his sensor beacons. Captain Solo went out into the deadly cold night after his friend, a seemingly suicidal act due to the lethally low temperatures on Hoth after sundown. It was a dark and sleepless night for everyone, but it thankfully ended with a sun-drenched morning and the rescue of both Skywalker and Solo. But the disturbing result of the near disaster was that Luke had been attacked by *something*. His face was deeply gashed and his cheekbone crushed. The symmetry of the cuts suggested claws very large, very sharp claws.

Something *was* out there after all.

When Luke revived from the bacta tank, some questions were answered. He was apparently attacked by some sort of creature, a full three meters in height, with deadly claws and a nasty temperament. He had only seen one of the beasts, but where there's one there must be more. Immediately base security was stepped up. Major Derlin ordered regular perimeter patrols, and scouting expeditions went back to the buddy system.

There was no way for anyone to have known what would happen next. True, all of us became a bit more cautious after Commander Skywalker's experience, but no one knew the true extent of the problem. No one possibly could have guessed. That is until the following evening.

It started with the howling. Not an unusual noise, due to the high, whipping winds of Hoth, but this night it was stronger than usual, and somehow more chilling. Next came the attack on Bervin, and a brief, panicked comlink call, abruptly cut off by a bellowing inhuman roar and a horrified, distinctly human scream.

I was in the command center that night with Major Derlin when the call came in. We rushed to Bervin's perimeter post only to find the signs of a struggle, but no sign of Bervin himself. Blood was spattered against the far wall of snow, where a large cave-in had occurred. The blood trail followed the shallow trench where Bervin's body had apparently been dragged out through the caved-in wall and into the icy cold night of Hoth.

Before long the calls began to come in. Reports of attacks all along the perimeter, following the same pattern as this one, streamed in to command. They all sounded ominously the same: a lone sentry, attacked and dragged off into the darkness. We made preparations to ready the speeders for night action, but there was no need. The beasts came to us. Crashing through our carefully carved walls of ice and snow as if those walls were made of so much flat-foil, they came. With claw and fang glistening with the blood of a fresh kill and howling their blood-curdling howls, they came.

But the beings of Echo Base had all seen much worse than this in the fanged, howling monsters of the Empire. They held off the beasts with courage, determination and with some heavy artillery. The creatures fled. They must have had their fill of heavy blaster fire, for we never saw them again. But more chilling than any of this was the apparent intelligence of the beasts. They worked together, in coordinated attacks, probably to defend themselves from what they perceived as an invasion of their territory. Had we remained longer on that frozen world, I have no doubt that we would have had more nights filled with their horror.

A SOLDIER'S STORY: HIT BY AN ION CANNON

"Sir! Rebel ships are coming into our sector!"

Hearing Lieutenant Cabbel's eager report, Captain Xamuel Lennox allowed himself a slight smile.

“Good,” he said, loud enough for the crew to hear, his hands kept folded behind his back. “Our first catch of the day.”

The frozen wastes of Hoth filled the viewports of the *Tyrant’s* bridge. If Darth Vader was correct, a rebel base was buried somewhere down there – and the rebels would be scrambling ships for a frantic trip up the gravity well. Lennox didn’t know what the rebels had — snubfighters, gunboats or capital ships – but it didn’t matter. His *Tyrant* awaited them on point, and behind her were the five other Star Destroyers of Death Squadron, arranged in a heavy attack line and backed up by the mighty *Executor*.

“Captain! Sensors paint three ships inbound from planetside! Two fighters and a transport!”

“All stations, prepare to fire on my mark.”

Lennox noted the flurry of activity in the bridge pits in his peripheral vision, but kept his eyes fixed dead ahead, awaiting contact.

“Captain, Com-Scan reports power fluctuations on the surface!”

Of what sort? Lennox wondered. He was opening his mouth to ask for clarification when it happened.

Lennox never saw the incoming rebel ships – they were still too far away to be visible. His eyes barely registered the brilliant orange lances of fire that emerged from the white expanse before him, but years of training allowed his brain to identify them and what they meant in the second before they passed through the *Tyrant’s* shields and slammed into her hull, impacting first her dorsal superstructure and then her conning tower.

Ion cannon.

The impact wasn’t as powerful as a turbolaser blast, but it still knocked Lennox to the deck and sent his cap skittering across the durasteel. He stared at the lost cap, blinking away the orange spots left on his vision.

It wasn’t just his vision, he realized – the *Tyrant’s* bridge had been plunged into darkness, lit only by the reflected light of the planet outside. Blue sparks arced over the darkened consoles of the bridge pits. Cabbel was barking orders no one was listening to. Crewmen were reporting that they couldn’t get power readings. A droid let out a mechanical screech that decayed into a burbling underwater groan. Something twitched madly in Lennox’s right hip, forcing his booted toe to tap out a staccato rhythm on the deck. It was his myoelectric hip replacement, he realized – overwhelmed by the surge of energy like everything else.

"All stations report!" Cabbel barked again.

"Belay that," Lennox said, trying to calm his twitching leg and get to his feet. The *Tyrant* had rolled to starboard and pitched forward, guided by whichever engines had been the last to fail. She was in no danger of impacting the planet, Lennox noted, but had rolled off the point position in the heavy attack line. The *Accuser* would have to come up to take her place. At least, Lennox thought, there was little danger that the rebels would send fighters to finish his ship off. He doubted they'd be able to spare them, given the need to protect their transports and evade the rest of Death Squadron.

And then Lennox began to float. The artificial gravity had failed as the command bridge's backup generator fell prey to the charged particles playing havoc with the ship's systems. He grabbed for a handhold and secured himself, watching Cabbel tumble end over end in consternation while the bridge crew gaped up at him from where they sat strapped into their stations. Datapads and rank cylinders and duty caps made for a mass of aerial flotsam.

Ion cannon – and not a ship-mounted one, either. Bigger than that. Planetary emplacement.

The myriad systems of the *Tyrant* normally produced a constant thrum that was both a low sound and a faint vibration felt through the deck. That vibration could drive some midshipmen mad, leaving them unable to sleep or think – nearly every Academy class had one or two members whose first training cruise was their last. Lennox had never minded the thrum – in fact, he missed it when he was dirtside. It was his ship's heartbeat, now stilled. The *Tyrant* was silent save for Cabbel's sputtering and the crew's useless status reports. She was dead in space — and she would remain that way, Lennox realized with a scowl, until after the outcome of the Battle of Hoth had been decided.

The heat from the barrel of his blaster rifle warmed the hands of the Rebel soldier. When he set the rifle aside to use his macrobinoculars, his flesh retained the memory of the gun's trigger squeezing tightly against the inside of his first finger.

Through his macros, the soldier could see the thin black wisps of smoke which marked the position of the downed snowspeeder just beyond the ridge ahead. He had seen a mighty Imperial walker shoot down the Rebel craft, dispatching the speeder with an effortless shrug of its head. The last walker behind him now, the soldier decided it was safe to double back and check the speeder for survivors.

As the advance scout on Echo Base's North Ridge, he was the first to see the walkers. He was the first to feel the terrible thumping of their giant feet against the frozen Hoth tundra, and the first to come under their deadly guns. By all rights, he should have been the first killed. The speeders had saved him from that. He owed them.

Luckily, the speeder hadn't hit the ridge inverted. Judging by the deep trench stretching behind the craft, the pilot had enough control remaining after taking the hit to at least attempt a landing.

The soldier used the butt of his blaster rifle to smash open the canopy, and he lifted the unconscious pilot out of the cockpit. The gunner was gone. The after section of the craft had taken the full brunt of the walker's cannon shot — it probably ended quickly for him.

Slinging the pilot's harness straps over his shoulder, the soldier dragged the wounded man behind him as he crested the ridge. In the ravine below was the transportation he needed to get himself and the unconscious pilot to the evacuation staging area and off this frozen hell of a world.

Unfortunately, a squad of Imperial snowtroopers had just discovered his scouting buoy — and the tauntaun tethered to it. Following the conspicuous trail of footprints leading from the buoy, the nearest snowtrooper's gaze fell upon the Rebel soldier crouching on the ridge above. He pointed. His comrades opened fire.

Rolling back behind the cover of the icy crest, the Rebel soldier acted instinctively, reaching for the smooth cylinder at his belt. A flick of the detonator switch and the grenade was primed and ready.

"Have a nice day, boys," the soldier muttered, and shifted his body into throwing position, but he stopped just before tossing the explosive. He thumbed the "standby" key on the grenade's underside as he looked down at the snowtroopers diving for cover.

The explosion would probably take out the whole squad if he aimed the throw properly, but it would also kill the tauntaun. The soldier cursed softly. He needed that ride. He had to get the Imperials away from his mount before he could use the grenade. It was time to get creative.

The soldier quickly snapped off a few shots at the prone Imperials to keep them honest, then wedged his rifle in the snow, leaving the muzzle jutting out from the ridge crest in full view of the snowtroopers. He propped his hat and goggles up next to the rifle for effect, slung the pilot's limp form over his shoulder, and moved quickly down the ridge and circled back to his tauntaun.

Predictably, the Imperials advanced on the decoy, leaving one snowtrooper behind at the buoy. The Rebel soldier made short work of him, using his raynon scarf to muffle the trooper's scream. Still, he made enough of a sound while dying to catch the attention of his comrades. They turned, just in time to see the soldier's grenade landing at their feet.

The explosion left a deep pit of melted snow and ice where the Imperials once stood, and, as he slung the pilot onto the back of the tauntaun, the soldier grimly regarded the black, pitted rock at the bottom of the crater. He realized that this was the first time he had seen the actual surface of this forsaken planet.

The soldier rode off to the rendezvous point, the memory of his rifle trigger still pressing against his frozen finger. He wondered if it would ever go away.

In The Trenches

From the data-journal of Voren Na'al

Before Hoth, my combat experience had been extremely limited. Oh, there had been some tense moments and even a firefight or two in the past. In fact, situations like that are almost impossible to avoid while traveling with the Rebel Alliance. But nothing for me, or for that matter, for almost any of the other personnel at Echo Base, had come close to what we experienced beneath the blockade by the Imperial fleet. Nothing will ever silence the echo of the thundering footfalls of those massive Imperial walkers. There are nights when I wake up in a cold sweat, the nightmarish pounding still echoing in my mind.

When I first heard the distant thumping of those monstrous mechanical feet on the soft snowy surface of Hoth, I thought that it was perhaps my imagination. None of the soldiers around me were familiar with walkers — we had heard of them, but we had never seen one up close, or been able to imagine how terrifying those horrible machines could be.

The sound grew steadily louder. The ominous comlink call from our scouts on the North Ridge and ended with an abruptly cut-off sentence and the eerie crackle of a forcibly closed channel. Imperial walkers. The thought of facing those beasts with no true cover and no formidable combat vehicles was mind-numbing.

The only thing that prevented the fear from

running rampant in the ranks was that the tight, snowspeeder formation of Rogue Group roared overhead at that very moment. It prompted an inspired cheer from the nervous troops dug in all around me. We had seen our snowspeeder pilots perform maneuvers every day in the simulators, before the speeders had been adapted to the cold. But we had never seen the full squadron in flight, and it was a heartening sight. I'm not sure, but I think I remember seeing the lead speeder give a confident, if barely perceptible, waggle of his wings as it went by, almost as if to say "sit tight — we'll handle this."

But for all the confidence and heroics in the galaxy, nothing could have stopped the Empire on that day. The walkers were simply overpowering. It was all we could do to beat a successful retreat. The plan had never been to repulse the Imperial troops, or even to hold against their might. But there were moments in the early parts of the battle when we all felt as if we had a chance. I was there, in that trench, only as an observer. I arrived with a holorecorder in one hand and a datapad in the other. But before long I found myself shamelessly abandoning those seemingly useless tools for the cold comfort of a blaster rifle. In the end, I, like my companions, found myself in a desperate race for the safety of the transport while Imperial soldiers swarmed into the evacuated Echo Base.

A Plan of Desperation

The attack pattern used so successfully against the walkers was formulated by Luke Skywalker and noted Rebel tactician Beryl Chiffonage. Skywalker and Chiffonage knew they would face Imperial walkers in the coming battle and had to plan accordingly. To that end, they developed a number of tactics to face the seemingly unstoppable walkers.

Until the actual thick of combat, the fact that Imperial armor was too strong for the snowspeeders' laser cannons was unknown. The first two tactics of the so-called "Rogue Doctrine" dealt with using the speeders' cannons to maximum effect.

Attack pattern delta had a group of snowspeeders approach the AT-AT walker in a single-file formation. This only gave the walker a single target. When the speeders got into optimal firing range, the first speeder fired. It then peeled off in one direction. While the AT-AT could only track a single speeder, the remaining speeders could each take a clear shot, and then part in a different direction.

Another maneuver, the "bantha decoy," was developed by Luke Skywalker as a variation of a gag that he and his friends performed in T-16 skyhoppers at Beggar's Canyon on Tatooine. In it, two speeders approached from behind the walker, flanking it. One speeder trailed the other. As the lead speeder raced past the walker's head, it veered off across the other speeder's vector. As the AT-AT turned its head to follow the lead speeder, its more vulnerable neck was exposed to the second speeder's gunsights. This second speeder then took the opportunity to fire.

The last tactic of Rogue Doctrine was its most effective. While walkers were much more agile than they appeared to be, they were still mere machines. By using harpoons and tow cables to entangle the legs of a walker, the machine could effectively be tripped, bringing its own weight crashing down upon itself.

During the Battle of Hoth, Skywalker directed his pilots to implement this experimental and dangerous technique. This complex strategy involved first hitting one of a walker's legs with a power harpoon, making multiple passes completely around the walker's legs, and finally detaching the tow cable after the legs were sufficiently entangled. Because this attack required action by both the pilot and the gunner, many of the speeders in Rogue Group were unable to use this strategy, due to gunner casualties.

It was one of the Alliance's top pilots, Wedge Antilles, flying Rogue Three, and his gunner Wes Janson, who first proved that this strategy was not only possible, but devastatingly effective. The attack was a stunning success, causing the complete destruction of a walker in full view of both attacking and defending lines.

Until that point, the battle had gone poorly for the Rebel forces, and it seemed that the mammoth walkers were virtually indestructible. But after witnessing that first destruction of a walker, a great cry of approbation rose up in the Rebel trenches. The Rebels were inspired by the sight of the fallen behemoth, and found the means to down several more of the giant machines before the day was out.

The Price of Victory

Dark Side Campaign: Scenario 1: Secure The Prisoner

Your service to the Empire secures a special assignment with the scout detachment of the 501st Legion at the Battle of Hoth. When the walkers fall to the harpoons of the Rebel snowspeeders at the Battle of Hoth, you are there. Imperial morale holds its breath while the ground troops regroup. The finest officers of the Empire assemble their snowtroopers for an infantry assault on the trenches that protect Echo Base.

The 501st will be with the first wave of the attackers, and you're getting your equipment ready. Then an officer pulls you aside. 'You've got a special escort assignment,' he says. 'We've captured a valuable prisoner. He was once the leader of the Storm Commandos. This scum has defected to the Rebels.'

He takes you to a squad of snowtroopers led by an Imperial captain. They hold three prisoners in binders. One of them is a Rebel general. 'Take General Madine and his aides to the shuttle and then secure him aboard the Tyrant,' says the officer.

You're disappointed to miss the chance to attack the Rebel base, but this is an important mission and sure to be a credit to your career. The shuttle is landed only a kilometer away. However, the snow falls heavily and visibility is poor.

You have only two hundred meters to go when bolts of blaster fire thud into the snow near your position. 'Move the prisoners to the rear!' you say. The troopers fall into battle formation and start firing their blaster carbines. The attackers are a group of Rebel commandos, better armed and trained than the regular Echo Base troopers. They're taking Madine's capture very seriously.

During the firefight, the Rebels rescue Madine's aides. However, you still have the general in custody. The rear guard action fought by your snowtroopers holds off the Rebels long enough. You board the shuttle with the most important prisoner. As the shuttle lifts off from the surface of Hoth, you can see below the battle near the trenches that assures you the Empire will capture Echo Base.

Light Side Campaign: Scenario 1: Imperial Entanglements

You're defending a trench at the Battle of Hoth when Wedge Antilles gives you a special mission.

'Keep your heads down!' says Wedge Antilles. You're in a trench at the Battle of Hoth. Fresh from bringing down an AT-AT with his snowspeeder, Wedge has taken command of your detachment while the evacuation from Echo Base continues. A group of Imperial snowtroopers heads toward your emplacement while your unit lays down covering fire.

'Concentrate your fire on that squad to the right,' says Wedge.

An Echo Base trooper gives his comlink to Wedge. He speaks into it for a moment, and then springs into action. 'Come with me!' says Wedge, pointing at you. Grabbing your weapon, you follow him out of the trench as he jumps into his snowspeeder.

'General Madine has been taken by the Imps,' says Wedge. 'We're going to get him back.' He flips a few switches and the snowspeeder rises into the cold air of Hoth. You can see the battle still raging, as stormtroopers fire on the entrenched Rebels. From behind Echo Base, you see an Alliance transport blast away into the sky. Your snowspeeder races across the icy plains.

'Squad of snowtroopers at three o'clock,' you say to Wedge.

'Good eye,' he says. 'I'll put the speeder down behind that ridge.' With a deft maneuver, Wedge lands your vehicle on the hard packed snow with a thud.

Looking over the ridge, you see General Madine in binders along with two members of his personal staff. The snowtrooper squad is led by a captain in Imperial uniform. The group heads for an Imperial shuttle a few hundred meters away.

'We've got to act fast,' you whisper to Wedge. 'Agreed,' says the Rebel officer, as he bounds over the ridge. He rushes forward, pulling his blaster as he runs. You follow him at a dead run towards the Imps.

You've rescued both members of Madine's staff that were captured with him. Unfortunately, that Imperial officer, Captain Brek, got away with the general himself. Before you can act, the two of them reach the waiting shuttle and it takes off into the wintry sky.

'This is no good,' says Wedge.

'Where did they say they were taking him?' you ask of the general's aides.

'Aboard the Tyrant,' says one. 'They're gonna take him to a prison on Dathomir!' says the other.

'I'll stay here with these two,' says Wedge. 'You take my speeder and get back to Echo Base. Tell Toryn Farr that you have to get aboard the Tyrant.'

'I can't fly a snowspeeder...' you say.

'It's easy, look here,' says Wedge, pointing in the cockpit as you get in. 'Throttle here, that's the stick.' He claps you on the shoulder and says with a grin, 'You'll be fine.'

The cockpit slams shut as you ease forward the throttle and pull back the stick. You rise uneasily into the air, and put the snowspeeder into a wide bank. Below, you see Wedge and the two aides waving. You punch the throttle and fly away towards Echo Base.

Light Side Campaign: Scenario 2: Aboard the Tyrant

Over the snowspeeder's comlink, you hear the anxious chatter. 'T-47 comin' in hot!' says one. 'Get the fire crews ready!' says another. 'I don't see gear down,' says a third.

You fumble for the gear switch and hear the landing struts lock. Your wobbly landing is a hard one, and the snowspeeder skids sideways on the metal surface of the Echo Base hangar. You screech to a halt with the starboard wing just inches from the wall.

A deck officer says, 'What are you doing flying a T-47?'

'Wedge Antilles sent me back,' you say. 'I've got to see Toryn Farr.' The deck officer says, 'Alright then. Come this way.' He leads you through the corridors of Echo Base to the ion cannon control room.

'Chief?' says the officer as he leads you in.

'I'm very busy,' says the young officer as she turns to face you.

'Wedge Antilles said to tell Toryn Farr to get me aboard the Tyrant,' you say.

'Is that right?' says Toryn Farr. 'Well, you're in luck, I'm the one who makes that happen.' She turns to another technician. 'Target the Tyrant now. Fire!' she says.

The room shudders with a blast from the heavy ion cannon above. The deck officer says, 'Come on, there's a shuttle ready in the hangar.'

Soon, you're boarding the Imperial Star Destroyer Tyrant with a squad of Rebel commandos. You've got to battle your way to the brig through a group of Navy troopers. Suddenly, a red lightsaber ignites and you see a dark-robed Sith among them. You get a bad feeling about this.

It's a fierce firefight, and when your troopers get the upper hand, the Sith escapes to another part of the starship.

'Glad to see you,' says Crix Madine as you open the door to his cell.

'Your aides are safe,' you say. 'Let's get out of here. General.'

In the docking bay, you commandeer a Lambda-class shuttle and return to the surface of Hoth. The battle is winding down and evacuations are nearly complete. A shuttle takes you aboard the Mon Calamari cruiser Champion that is heading for the Rendezvous Point.

Dark Side Campaign: Scenario 2: Report to Captain Lennox

Your shuttle lands in the docking bay of the Star Destroyer Tyrant. A squad of Imperial Navy Troopers meets you there. 'We'll take the prisoner to the detention block,' says one of them. 'You're to report to the Captain on the bridge.'

In the huge, windowed bridge of the Tyrant, Captain Lennox greets you warmly. 'What news do you have of the Battle of Hoth?' he asks. You tell him of the walkers' defeat, and the troops rallying to attack Echo Base. While you describe the failed attempt by the Rebel

commandos to rescue Madine, the Tyrant shudders with an explosive impact. Half of the data screens on the bridge blink out.

Sirens sound as a technician says to Lennox, 'Ion cannon, sir. Turbolaser targeting disabled.'

'Get those systems up and running, Helmsman,' says Lennox. 'We're blind. We could be boarded by a Rebel ship at any minute.' Then he turns to you. 'Go to the brig and make sure our prisoner is secure,' he says.

When you arrive at the detention block, all is quiet until one of the troopers gets an urgent comlink transmission. 'We've been alerted, sir,' he says. 'Rebels have boarded the Tyrant.'

Explosive charges blow the brig door open and it lands on the deck with a clang. Another party of Rebel commandos, this time led by a Major, pours into the cell block. The Navy troopers begin firing, and you must defeat the Rebel boarders to keep Madine secure in his cell.

You were sure your blaster shot brought down the Rebel leader. Then everything went black. When you wake up, the Alliance commandos are gone, and Madine's cell stands wide open. Since when do Rebels have stun grenades? You thought only Imperial troops used them.

You locate a comlink to make your report. 'The Rebels have Madine,' you say. Captain Lennox sighs. 'I'm aware,' he says. 'They took him to the docking bay and hijacked a shuttle. They've returned to Hoth, and the Tyrant is still ion shocked. There's nothing we can do.'

Perfect Evil





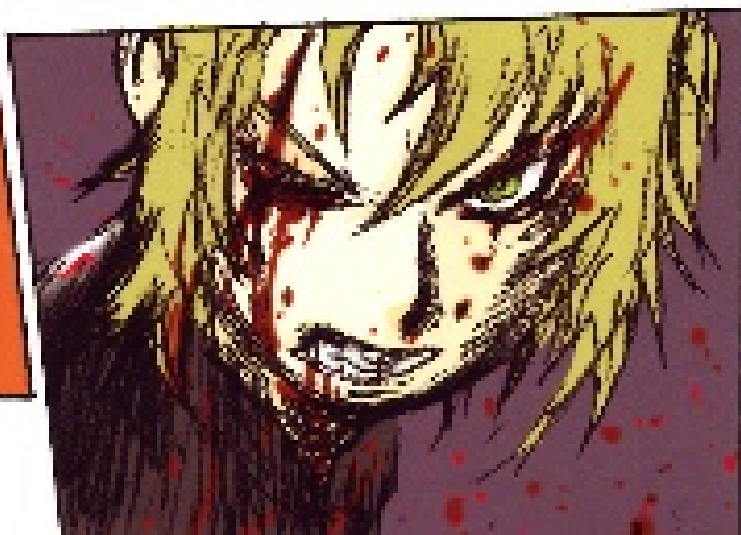


**NO!!
DAMN YOU!
YOU'LL PAY
FOR THAT!**

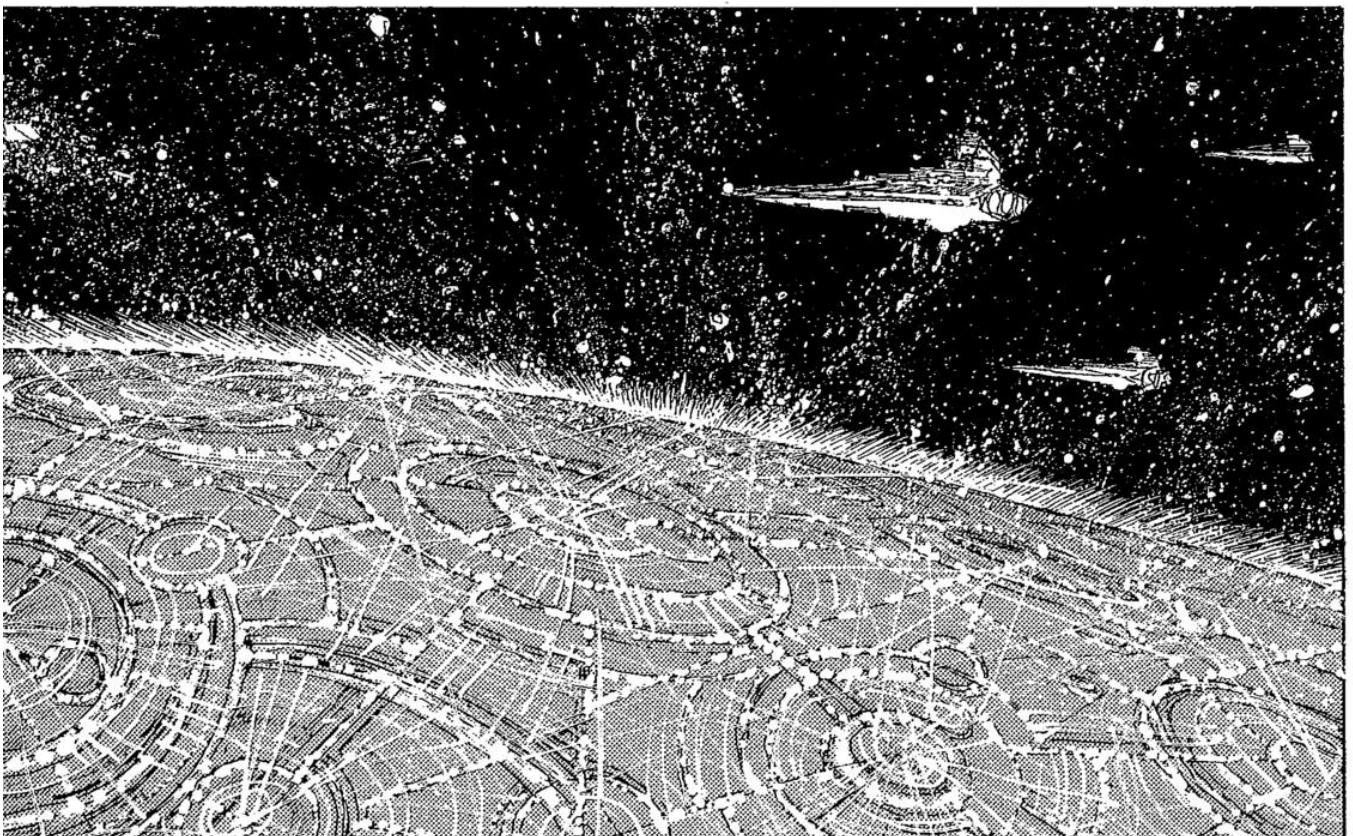
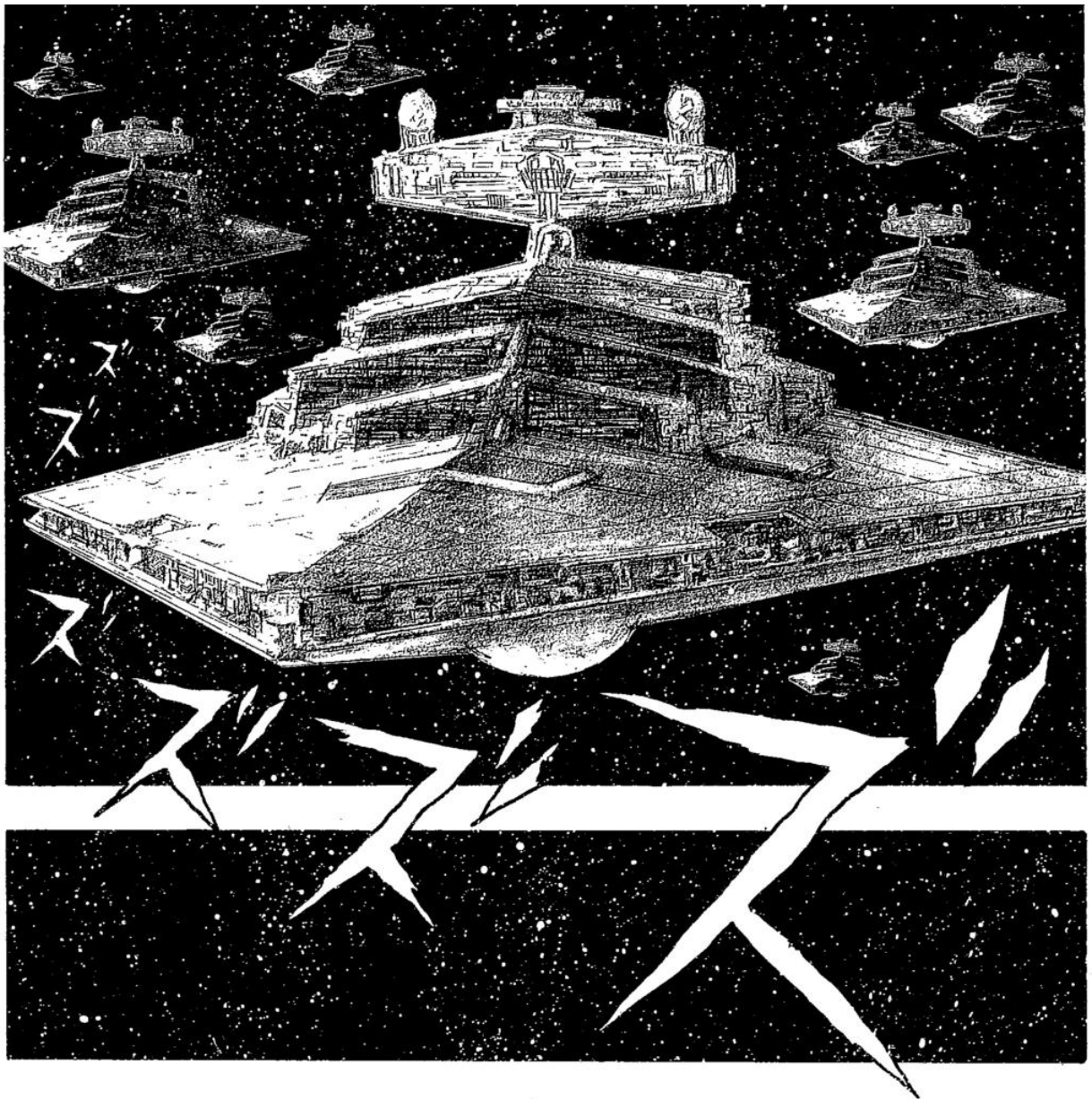


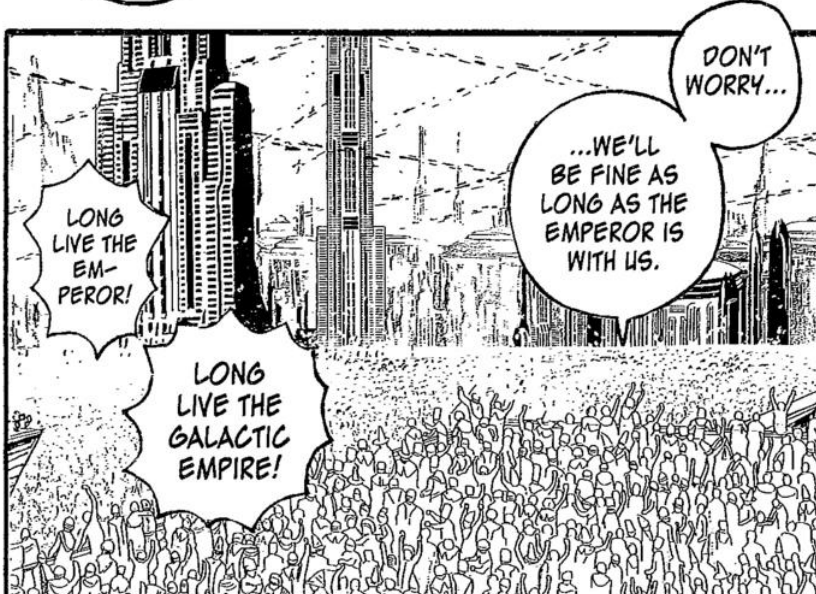
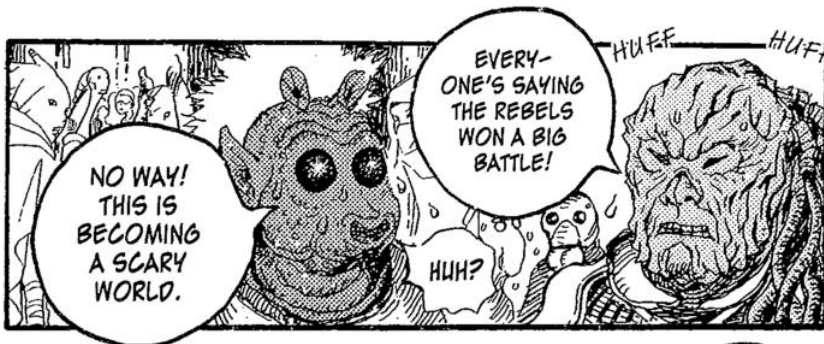
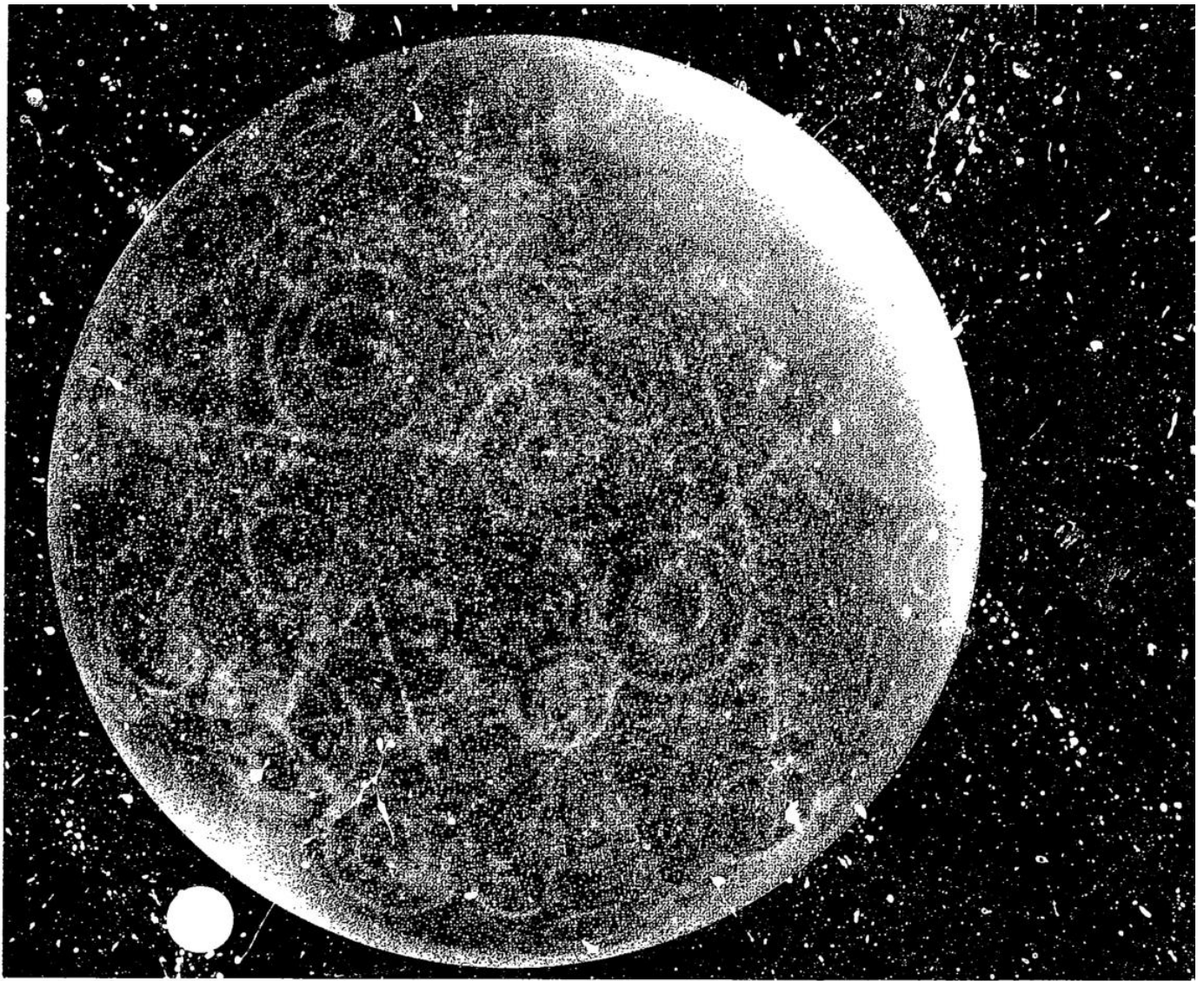


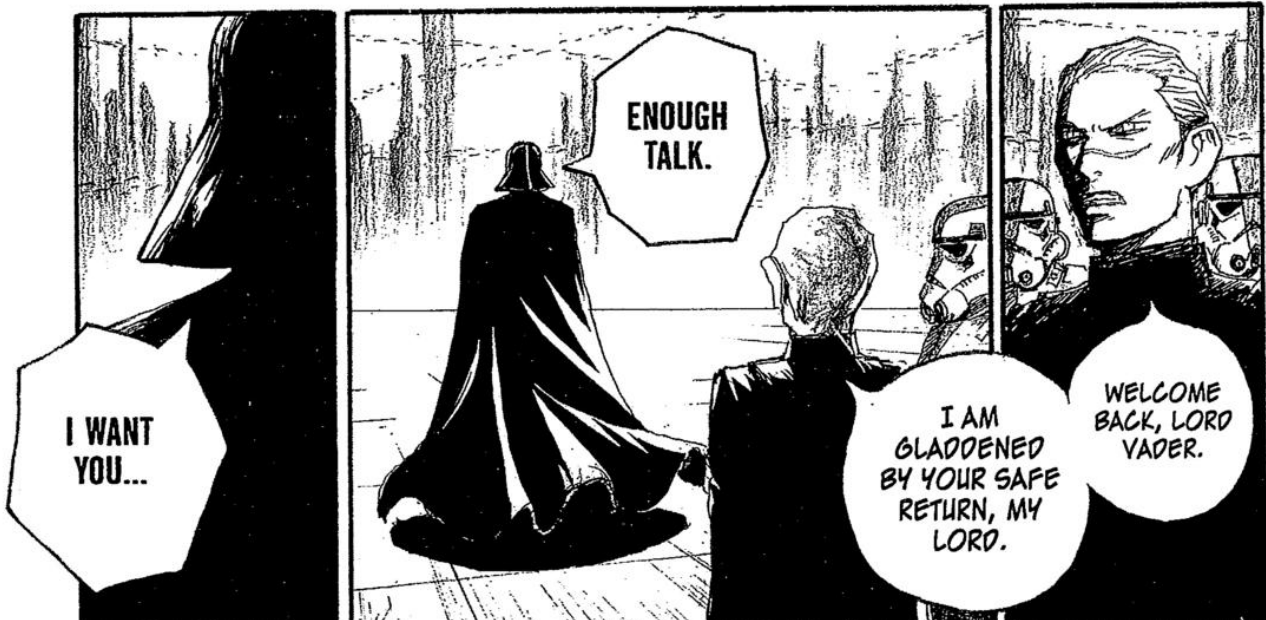
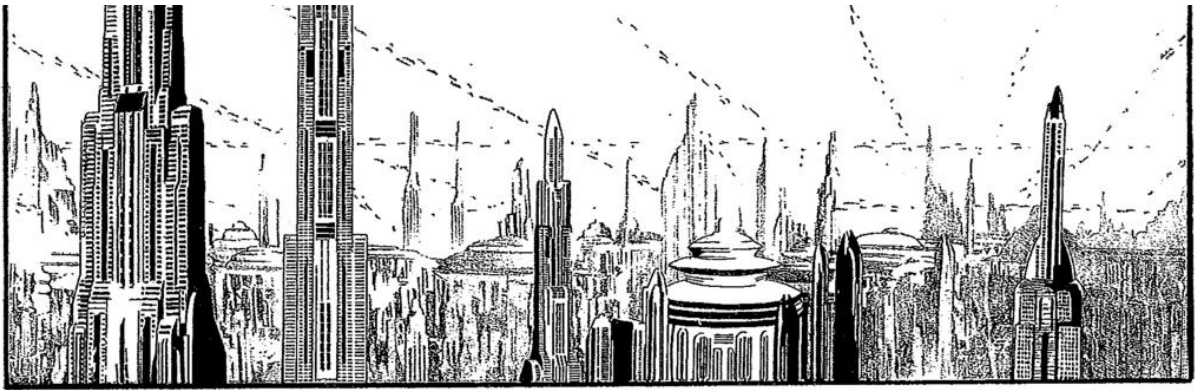


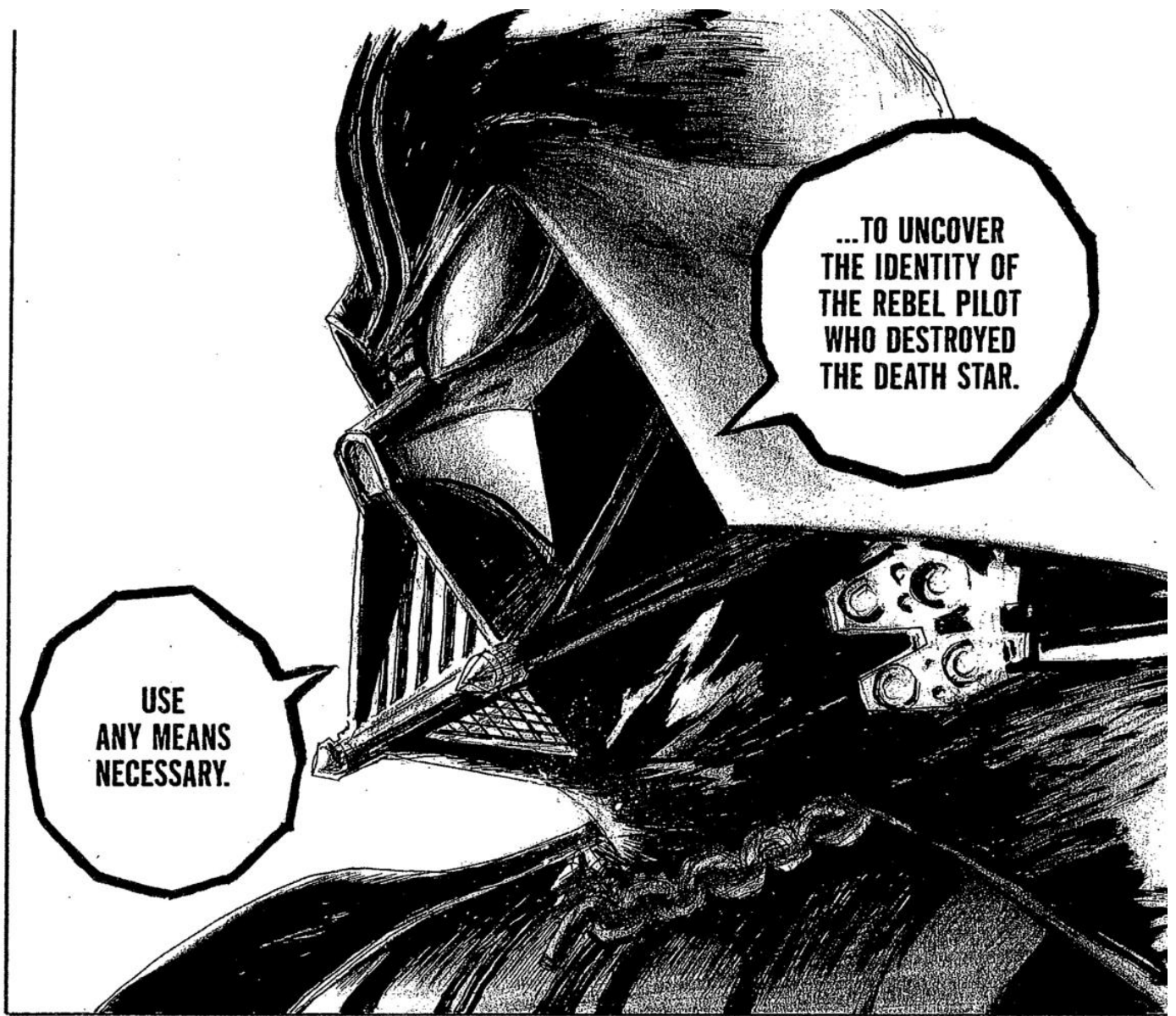






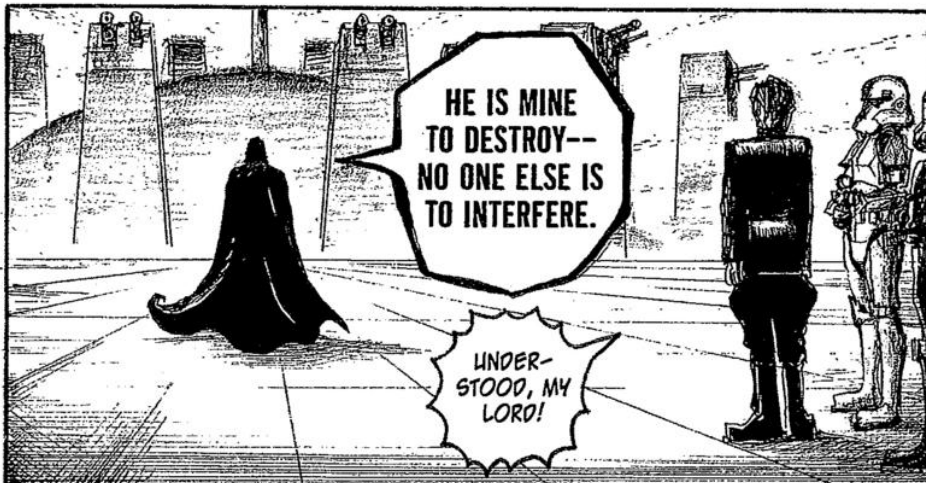






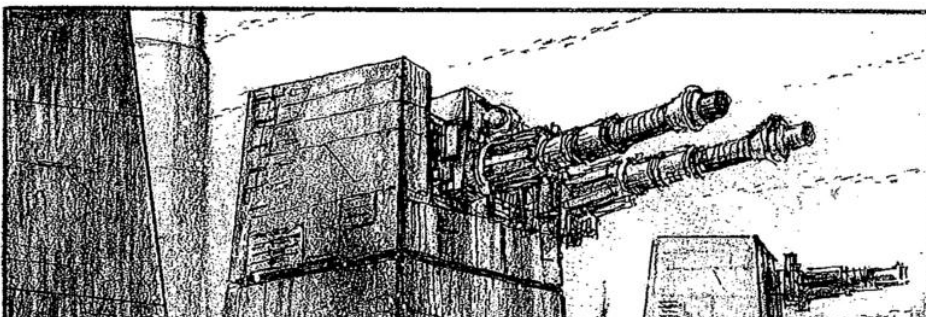
USE
ANY MEANS
NECESSARY.

...TO UNCOVER
THE IDENTITY OF
THE REBEL PILOT
WHO DESTROYED
THE DEATH STAR.



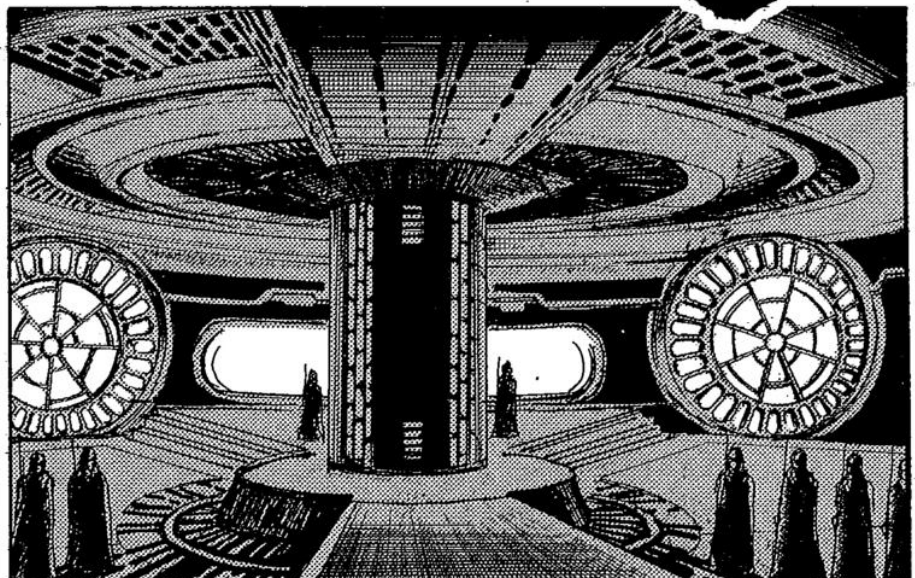
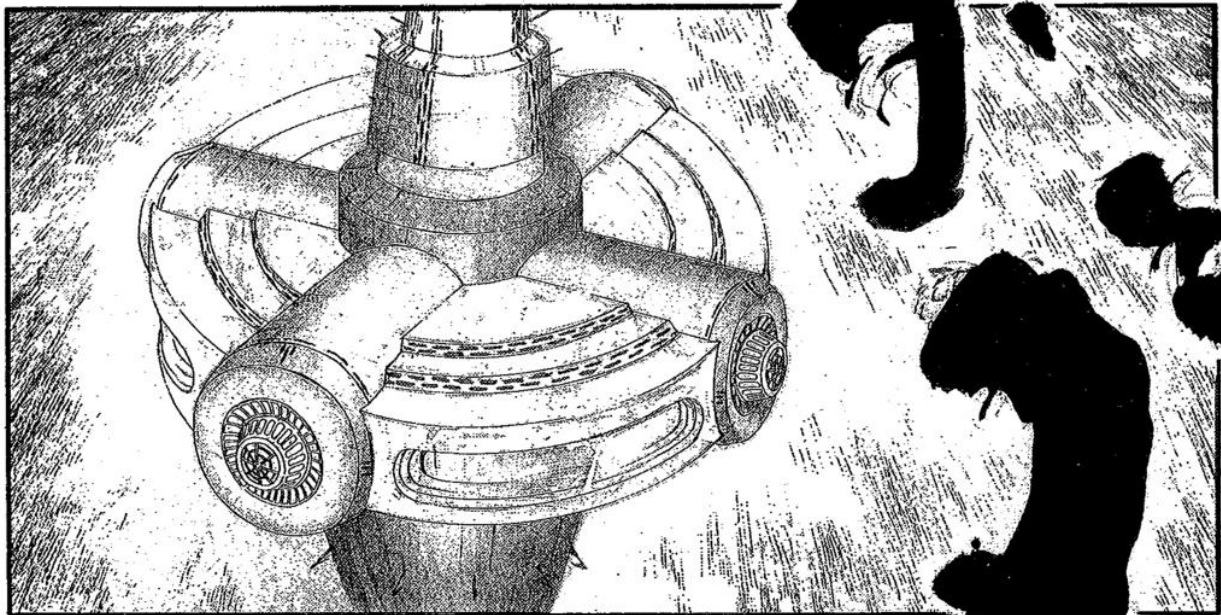
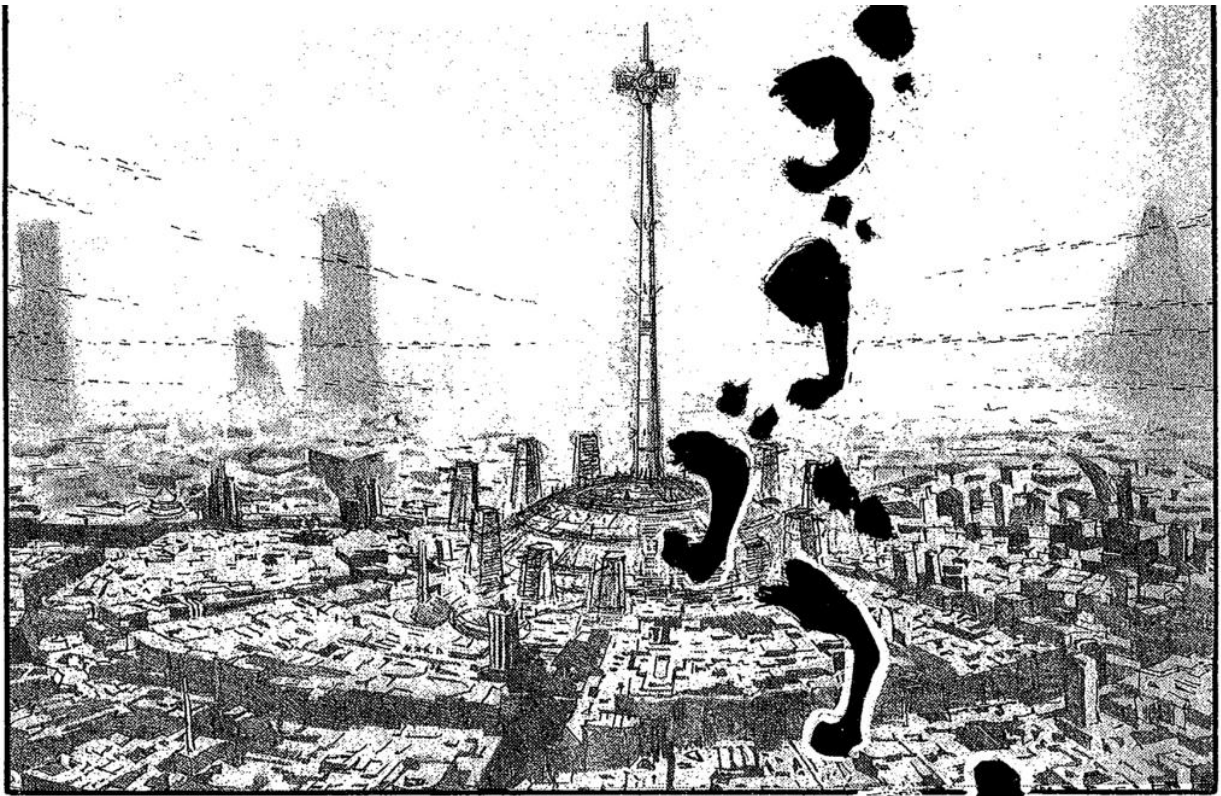
HE IS MINE
TO DESTROY--
NO ONE ELSE IS
TO INTERFERE.

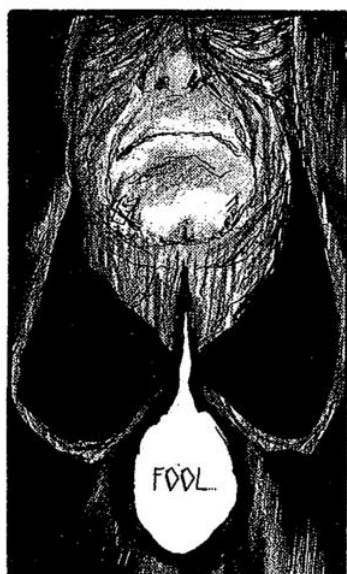
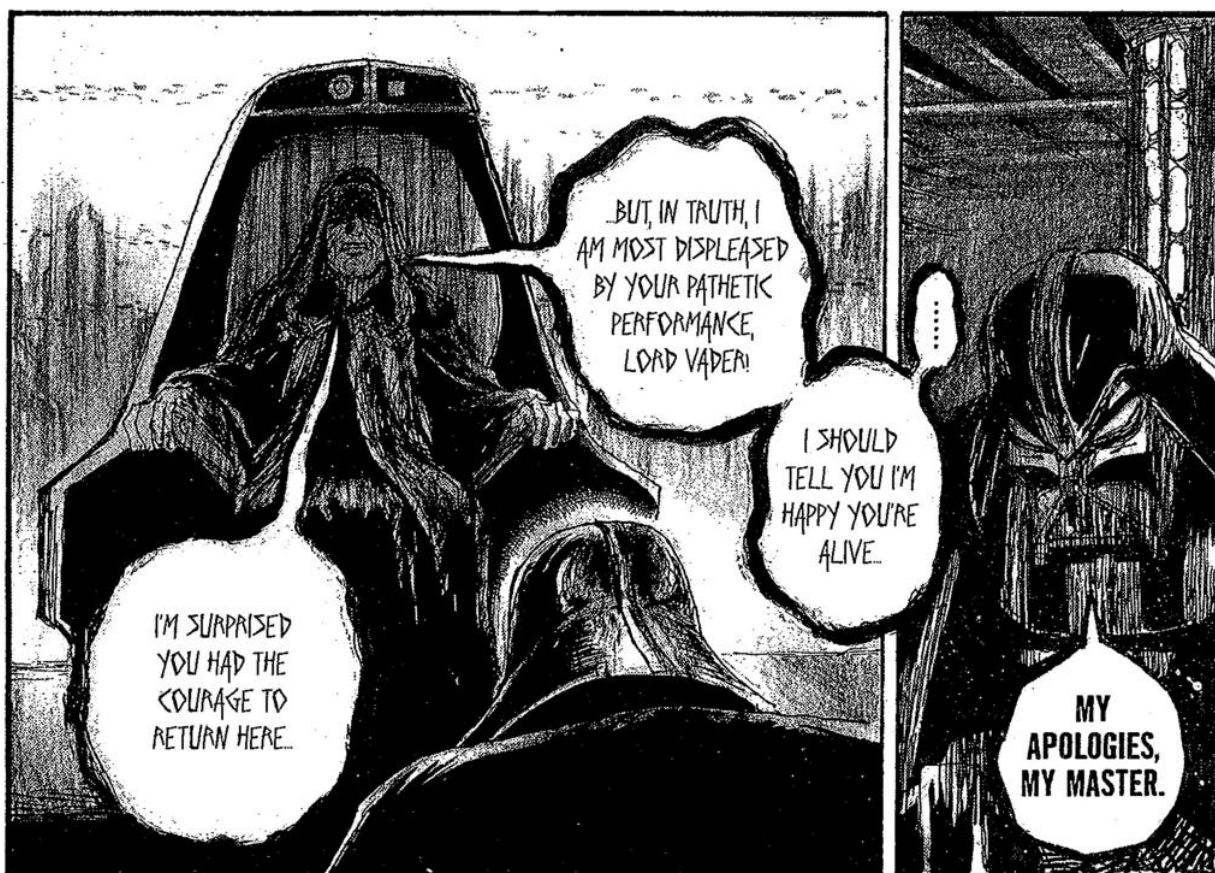
UNDER-
STOOD, MY
LORD!

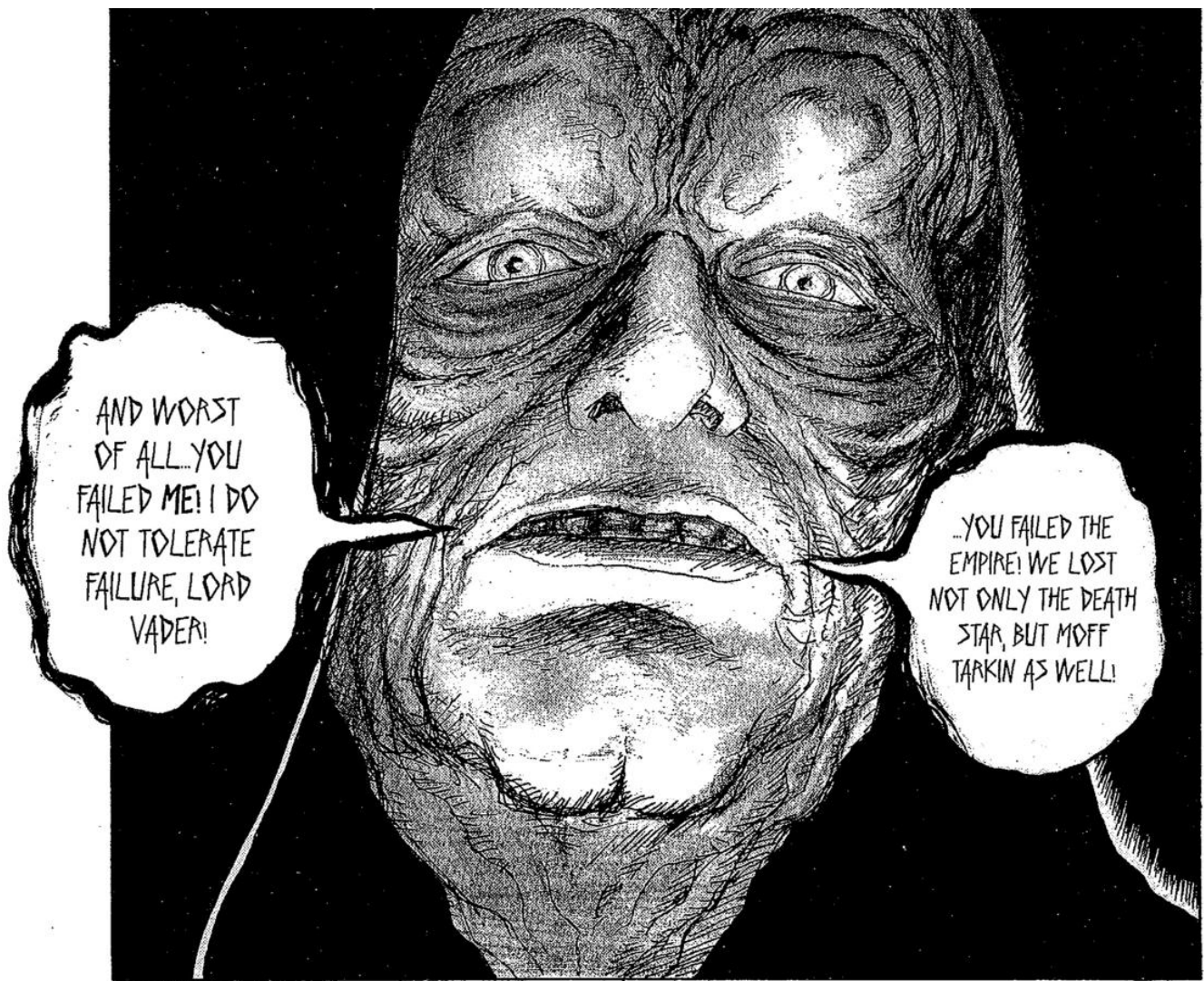


YES,
SIR!

AT
ONCE,
LORD
VADER!







AND WORST
OF ALL YOU
FAILED ME! I DO
NOT TOLERATE
FAILURE, LORD
VADER!

...YOU FAILED THE
EMPIRE! WE LOST
NOT ONLY THE DEATH
STAR, BUT MOFF
TARKIN AS WELL!



YOUR
FEELINGS...

...I SEE RIGHT
THROUGH YOU.



I SENSE A
DISTURBANCE IN
THE FORCE, MY
STUDENT.

WHAT'S
THIS?



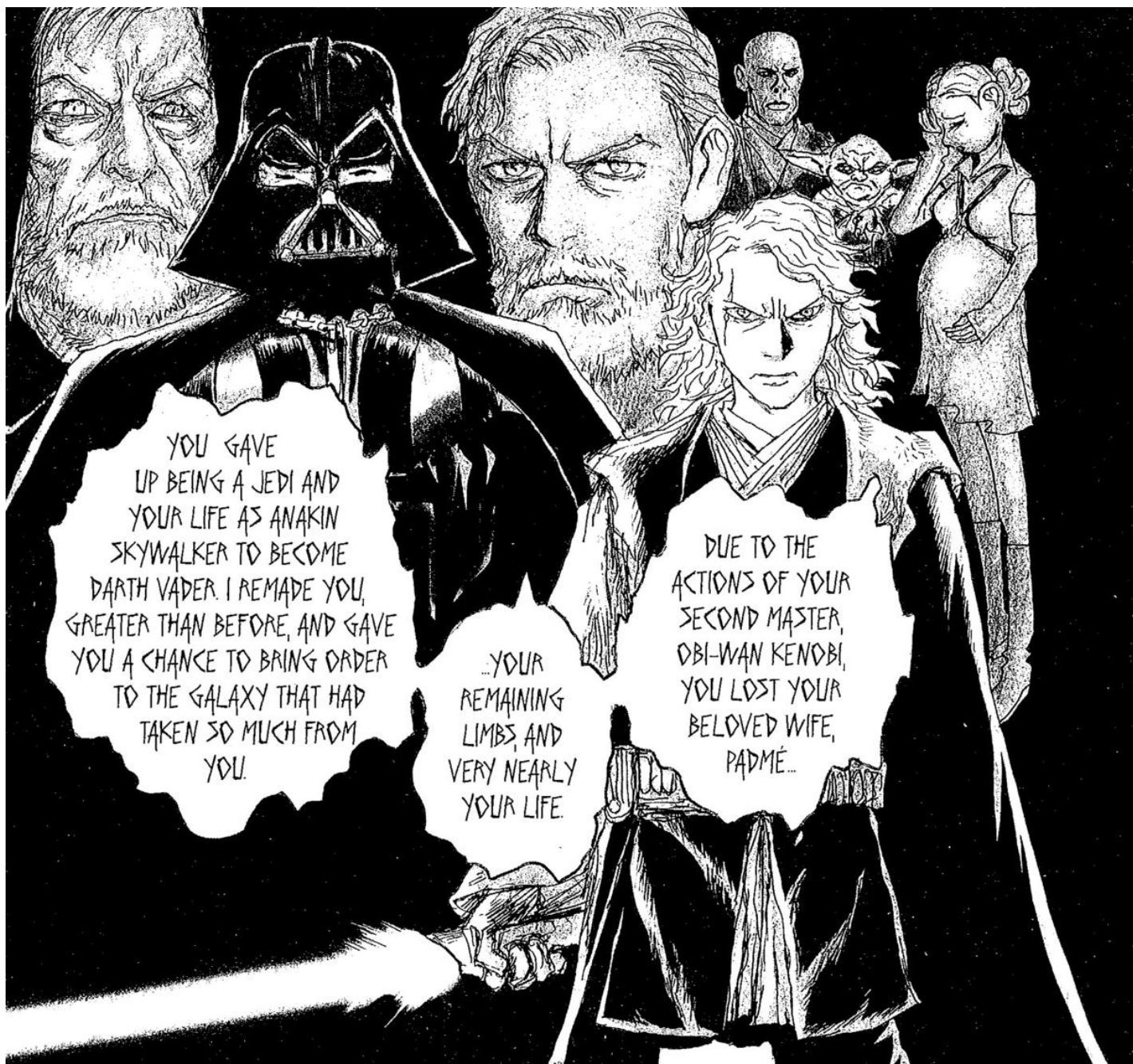
LORD VADER
YOUR LIFE HAS
BEEN NOTHING BUT
PAIN, ANGER, HATRED,
FEAR AND LOSS.

CHOSEN BY
FATE, YOU WERE
BORN A SLAVE
ON TATOOINE.

YOU WERE SEPARATED
FROM YOUR MOTHER AND
YOUR HOME BY THE JEDI, WHO
DESIRED YOUR INNATE
POWER FOR THEMSELVES.
BEFORE YOU REACHED
MATURITY, YOU LOST
YOUR FIRST MASTER,
QUI-GON JINN...

...AND YOUR
MOTHER, WHO
WAS TORTURED
AND KILLED
BY TUSKEN
RAIDERS...AND
YOUR OWN
RIGHT ARM.

YOU THOUGHT YOU
LOST EVERYTHING
YOU EVER HAD...BUT
THERE WAS MORE
TO COME.



YOU GAVE
UP BEING A JEDI AND
YOUR LIFE AS ANAKIN
SKYWALKER TO BECOME
DARTH VADER. I REMADE YOU,
GREATER THAN BEFORE, AND GAVE
YOU A CHANCE TO BRING ORDER
TO THE GALAXY THAT HAD
TAKEN SO MUCH FROM
YOU.

...YOUR
REMAINING
LIMBS, AND
VERY NEARLY
YOUR LIFE.

DUE TO THE
ACTIONS OF YOUR
SECOND MASTER,
OBI-WAN KENOBI,
YOU LOST YOUR
BELOVED WIFE,
PADME...

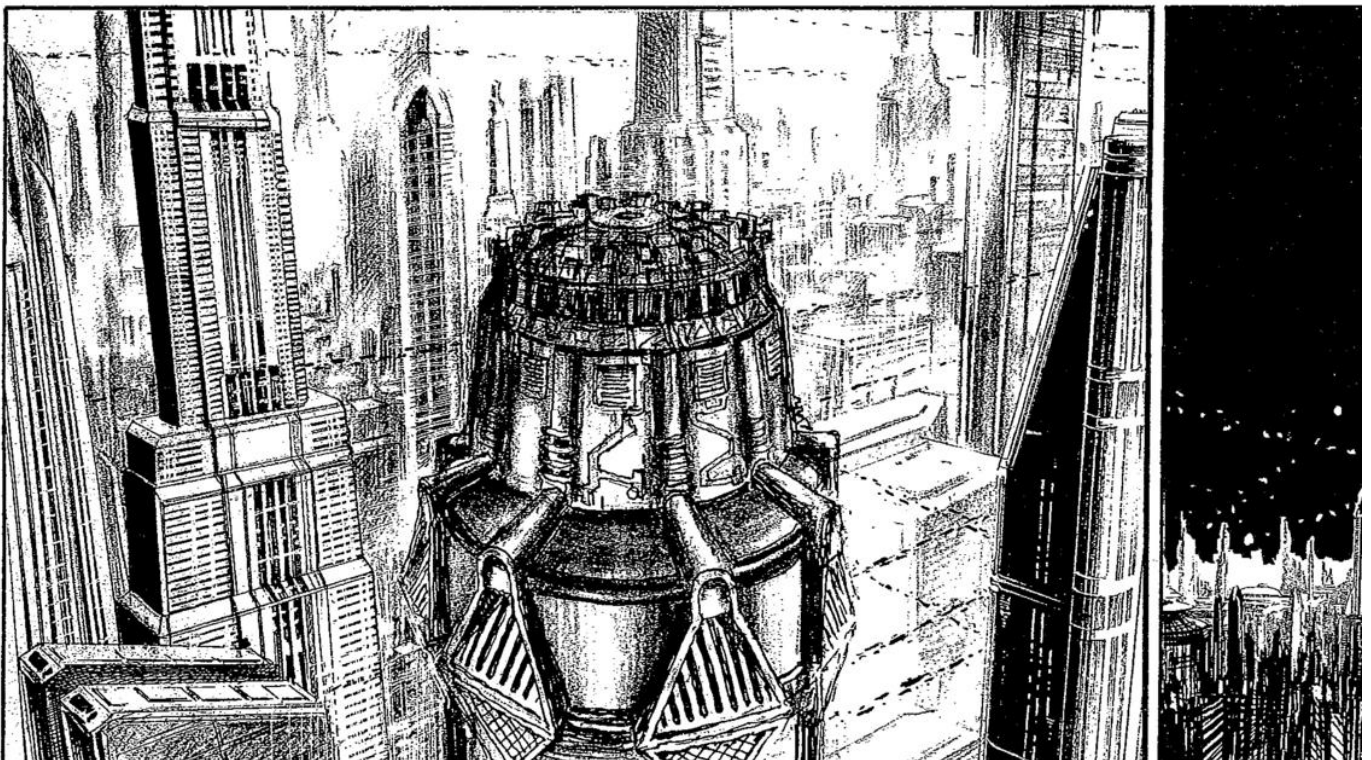
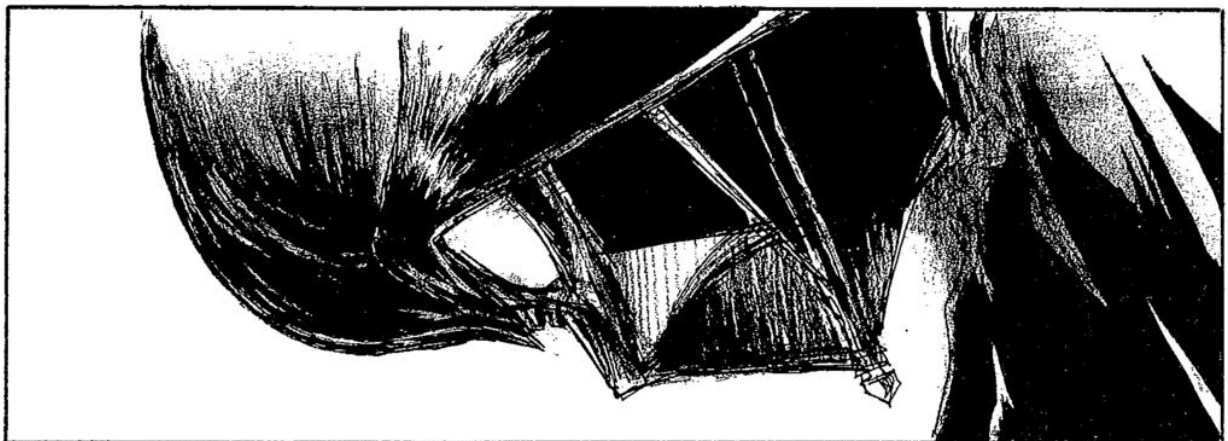


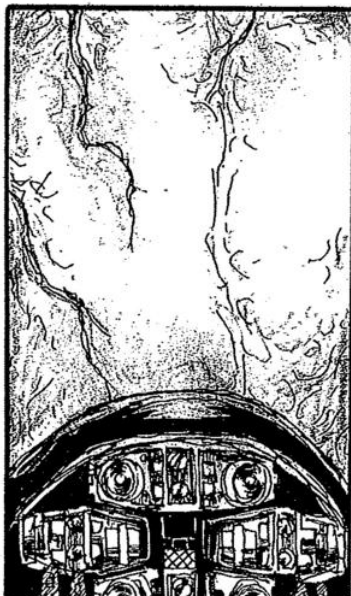
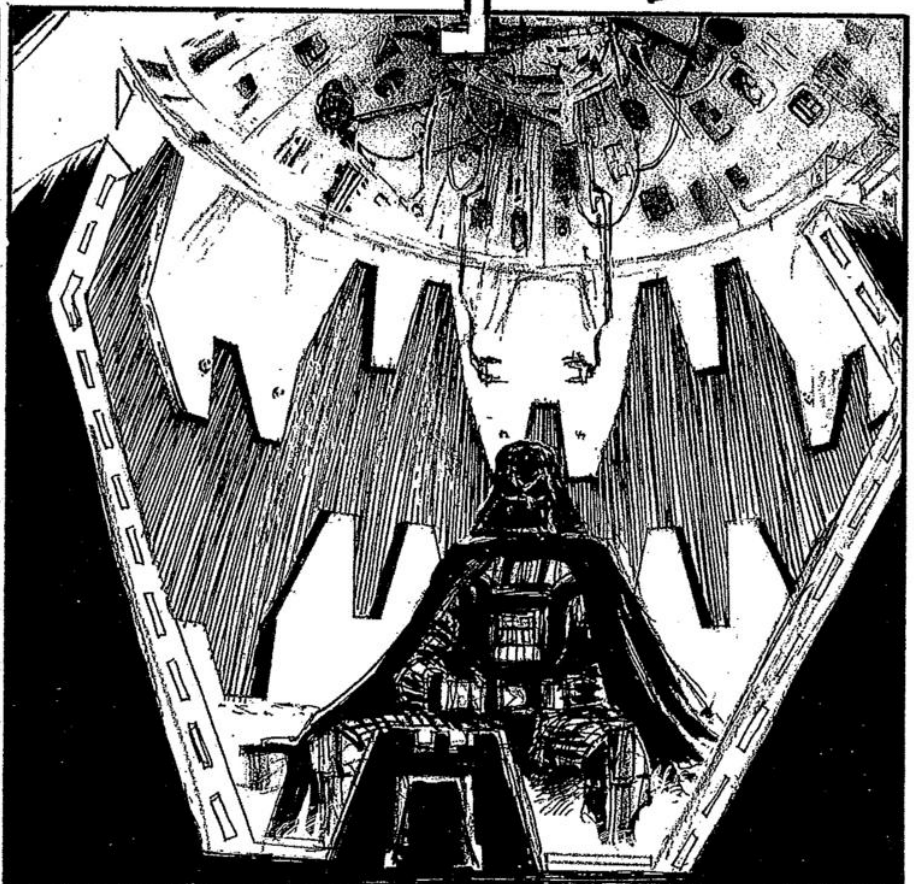
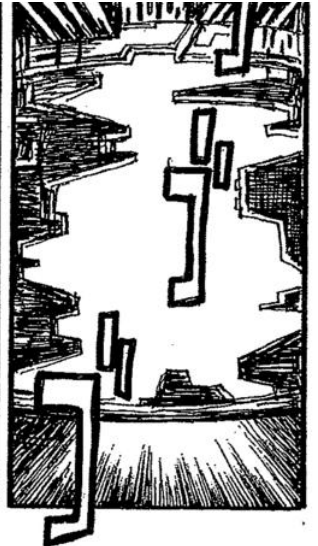
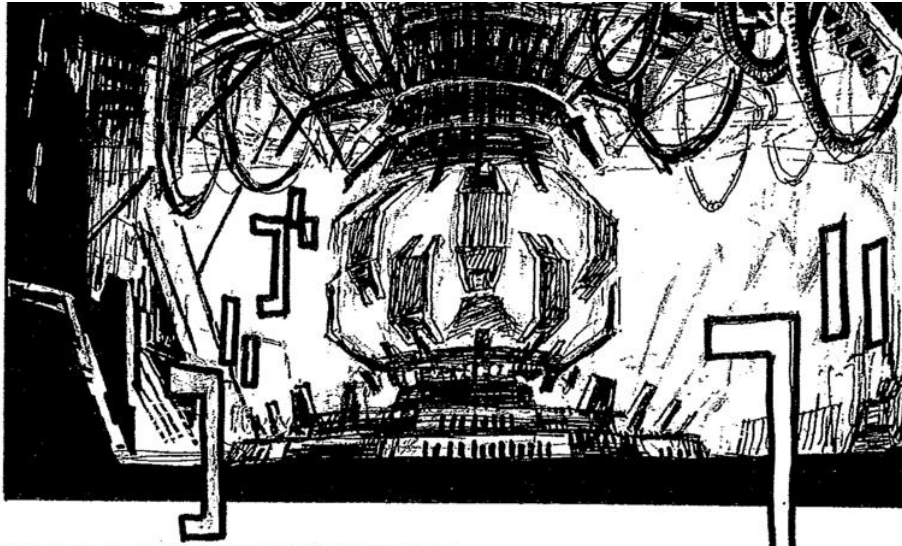
DO NOT
FORGET.

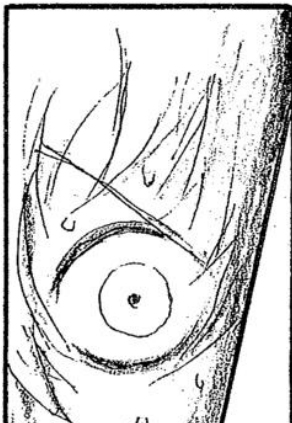
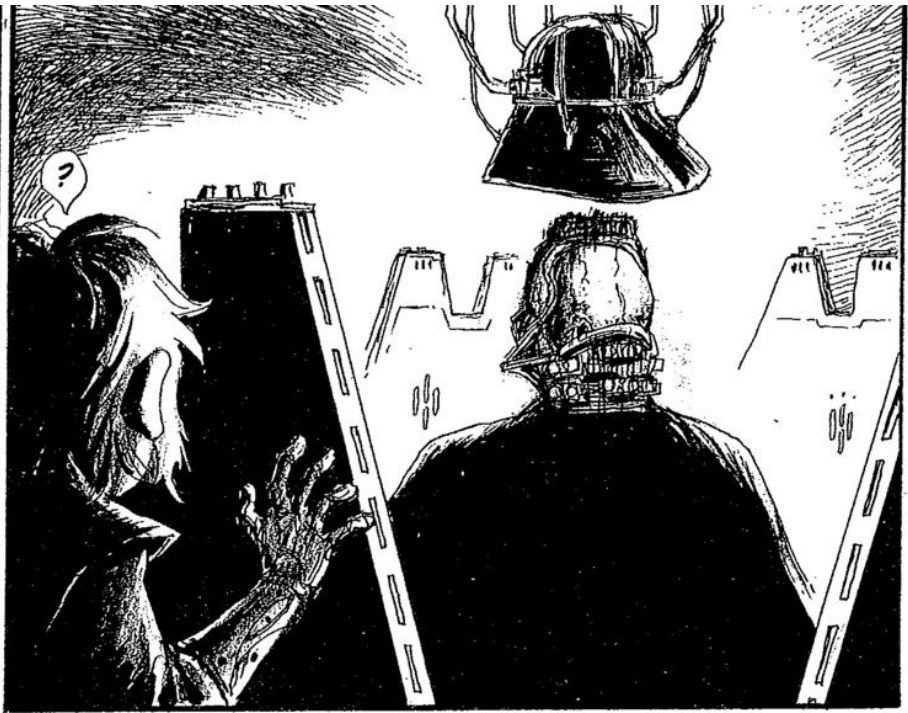
...YOU WERE
MY CHOSEN
ONE.

DO NOT
LOSE YOUR
FOCUS...

...



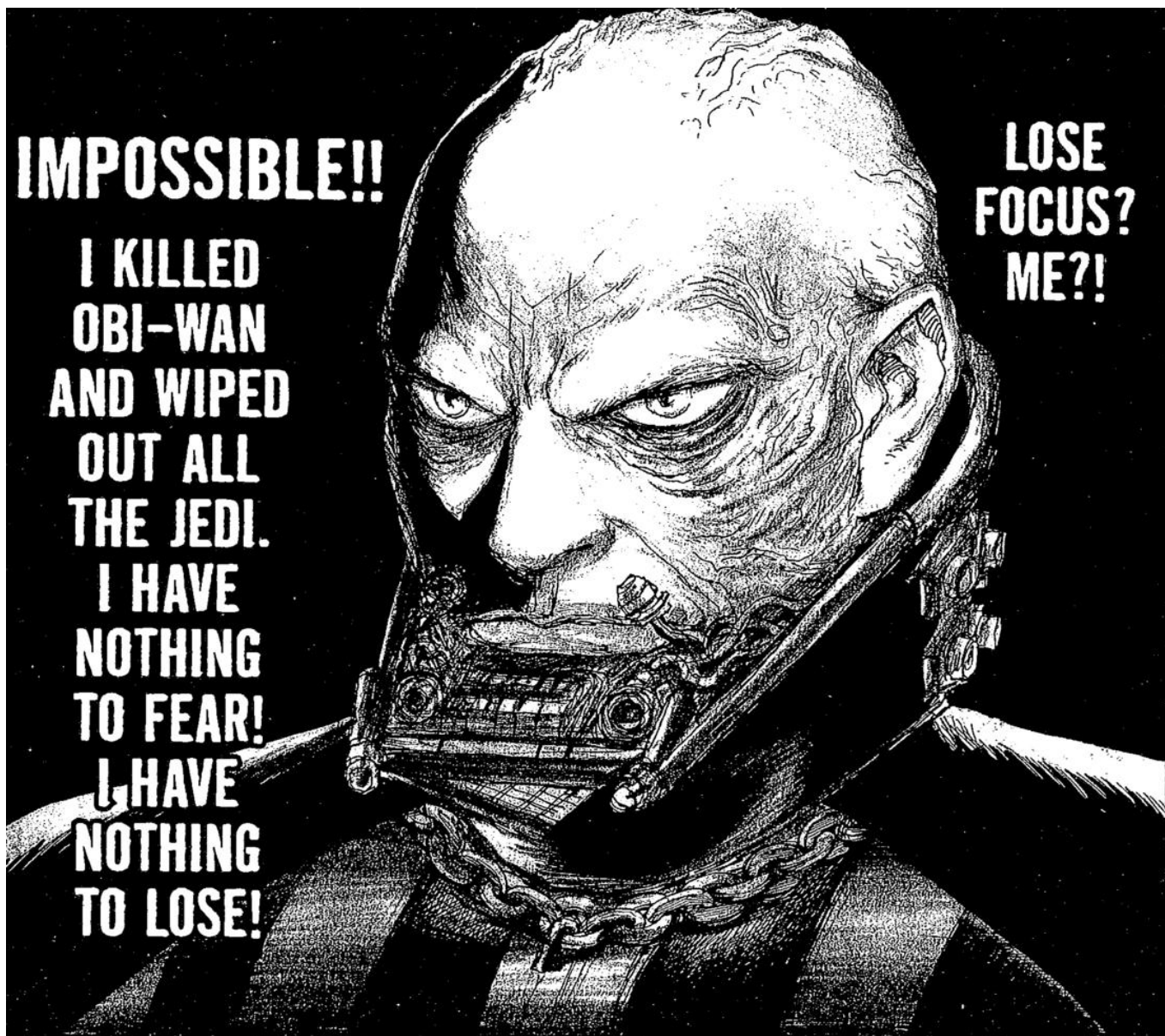




IMPOSSIBLE!!

**I KILLED
OBI-WAN
AND WIPED
OUT ALL
THE JEDI.
I HAVE
NOTHING
TO FEAR!
I HAVE
NOTHING
TO LOSE!**

**LOSE
FOCUS?
ME?!**



OH!

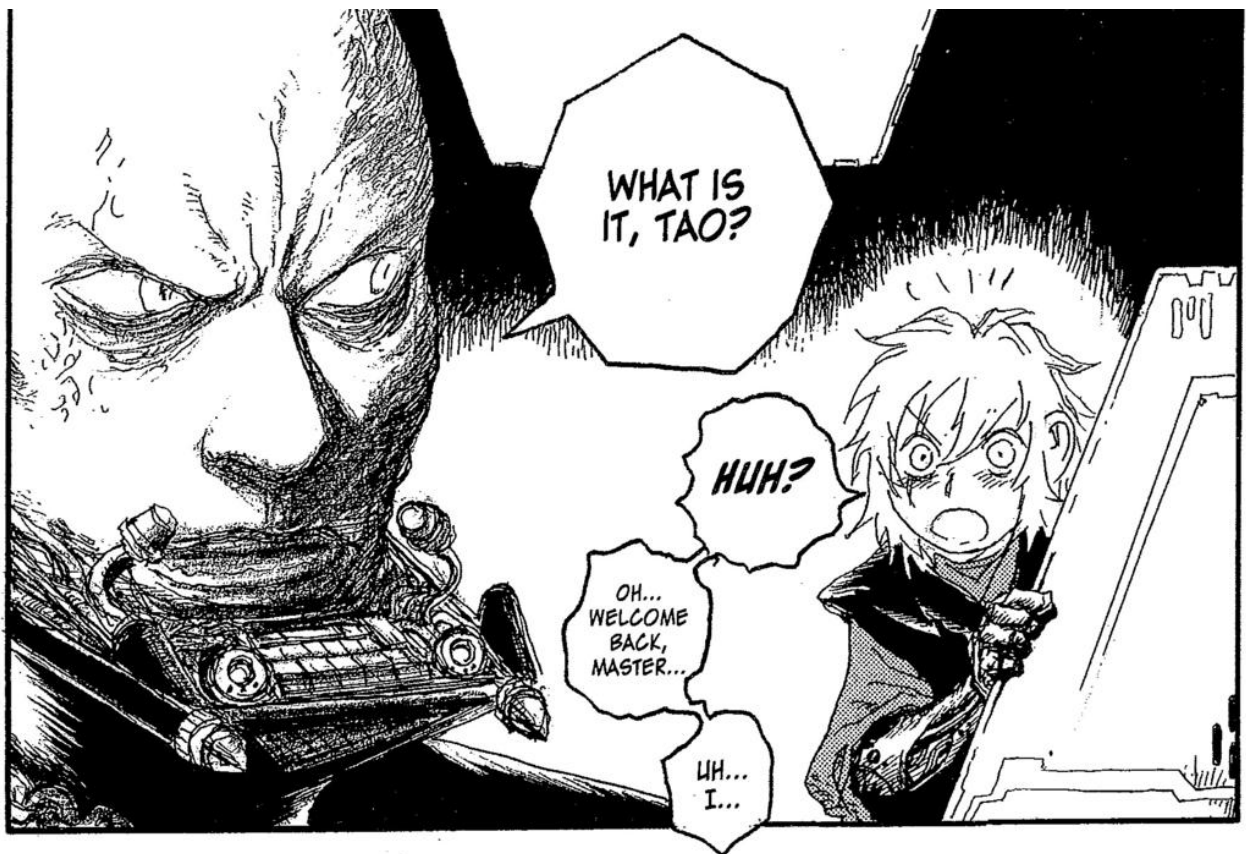
**IT CAN'T
BE! THAT
PILOT--**



BUT...

**...WHAT
IS THIS
FEELING...?**





WHAT IS
IT, TAO?

HUH?

OH...
WELCOME
BACK,
MASTER...

UH...
I...



I SENSED
SOMETHING...

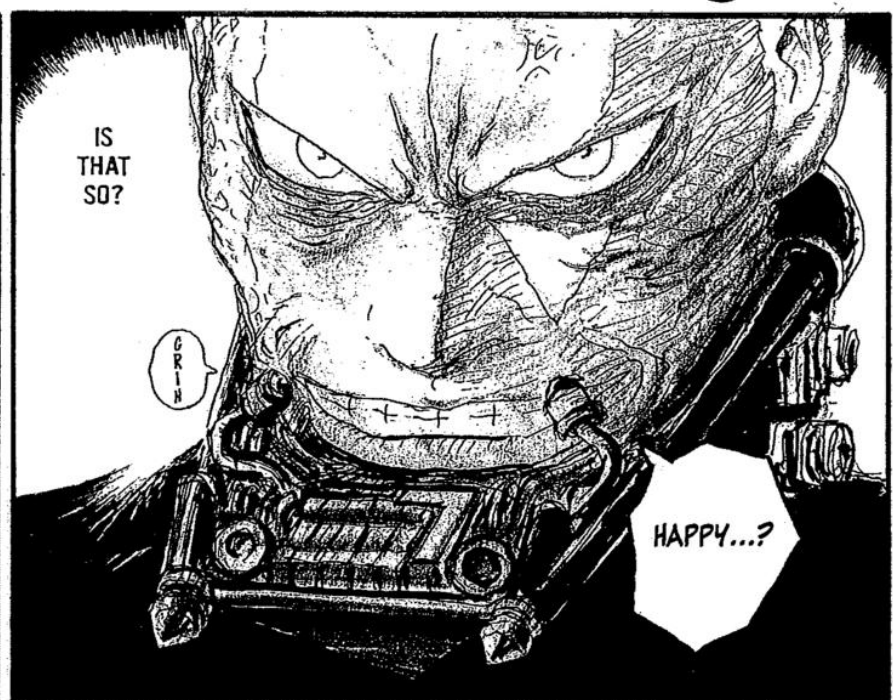
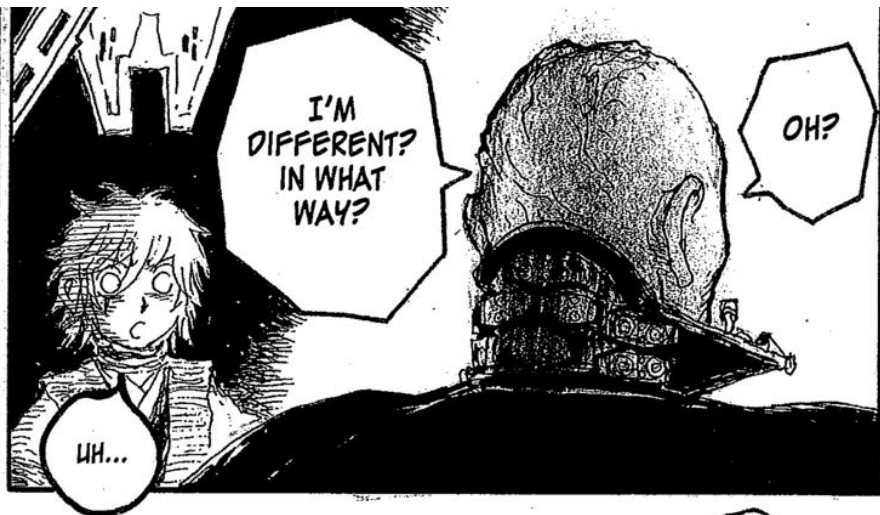
UHM...

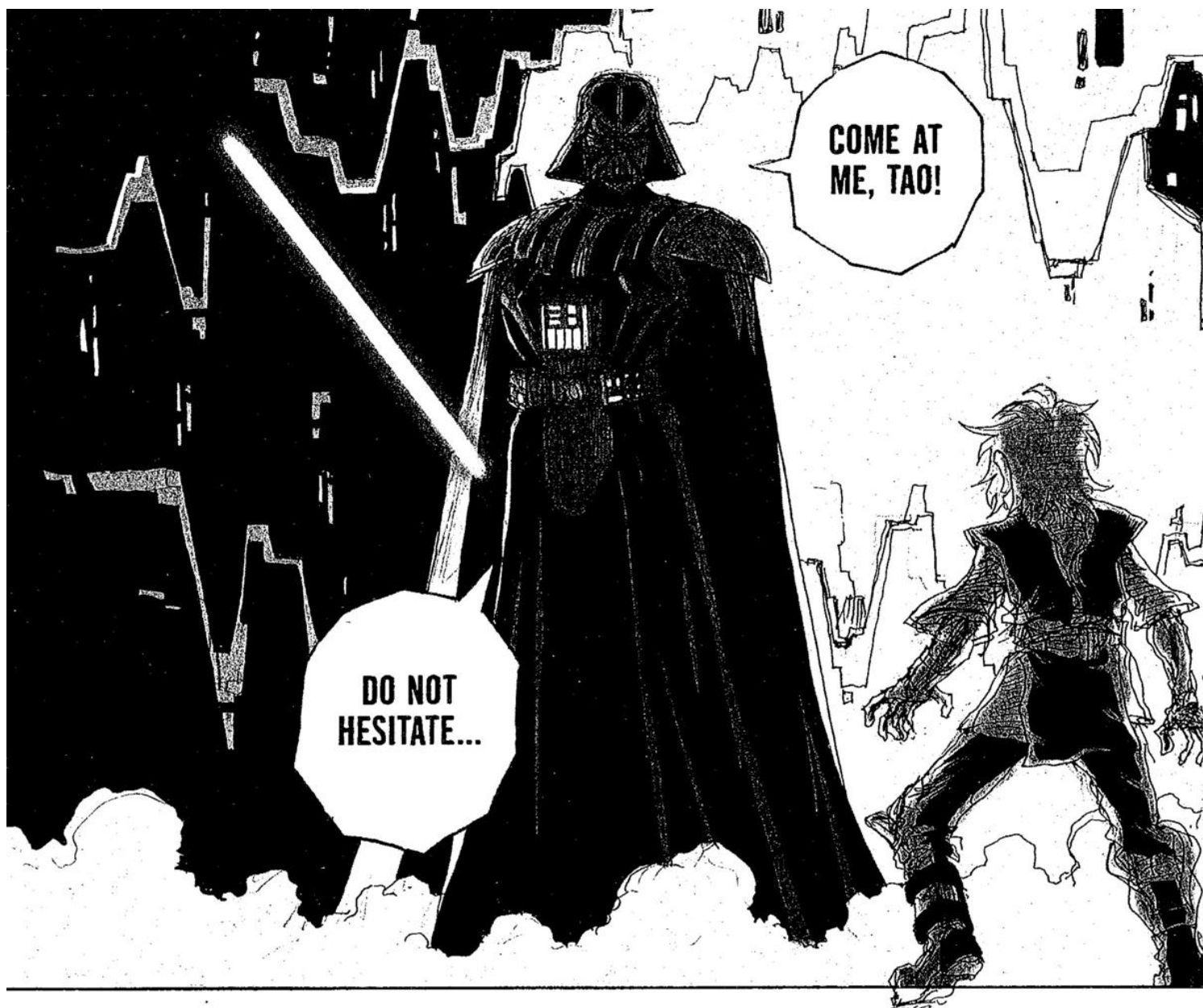
YOU SEEMED
DIFFERENT FROM
USUAL...SO...

FORGIVE
ME...MASTER
VADER...



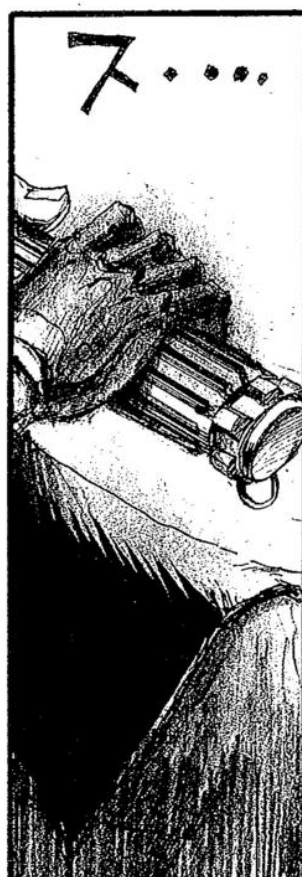
YOU ACT LIKE
YOU'VE NEVER
SEEN MY FACE
BEFORE...





COME AT
ME, TAO!

DO NOT
HESITATE...



7....

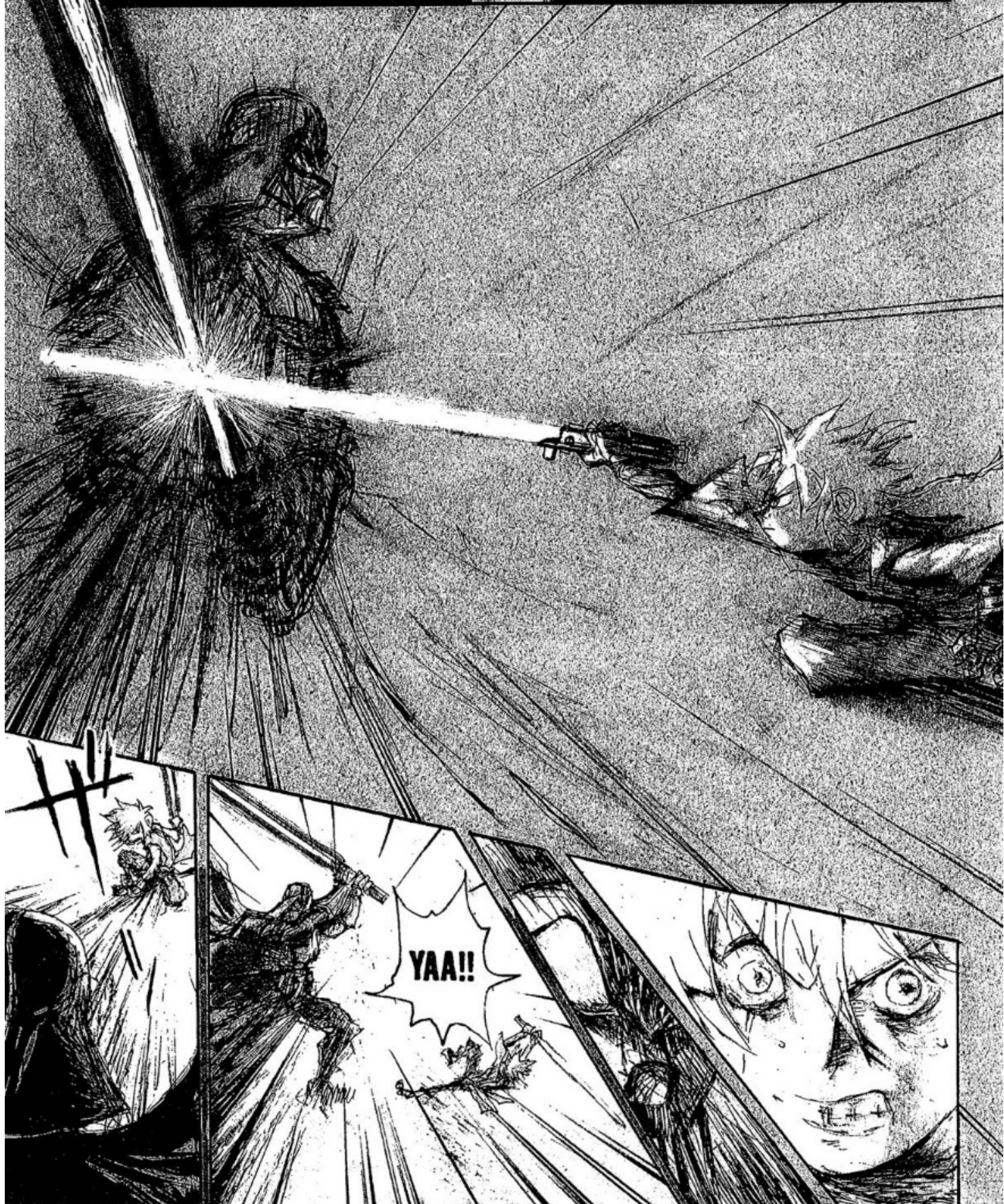


DO
AS YOU
FEEL!

...MY
STUDENT.

...AND
STRIKE!

FOCUS...



YAA!!





**DEFEND
YOURSELF!**

MORE!!

HARDER!!



**DAMN
IT!!**

**THAT'S NOT
ENOUGH!!**



**YOU'RE
LACKING ANGER
AND HATRED!**

**SORELY
LACKING!**



**BECOME
ANGRIER!!**

**HATE
ME!!**



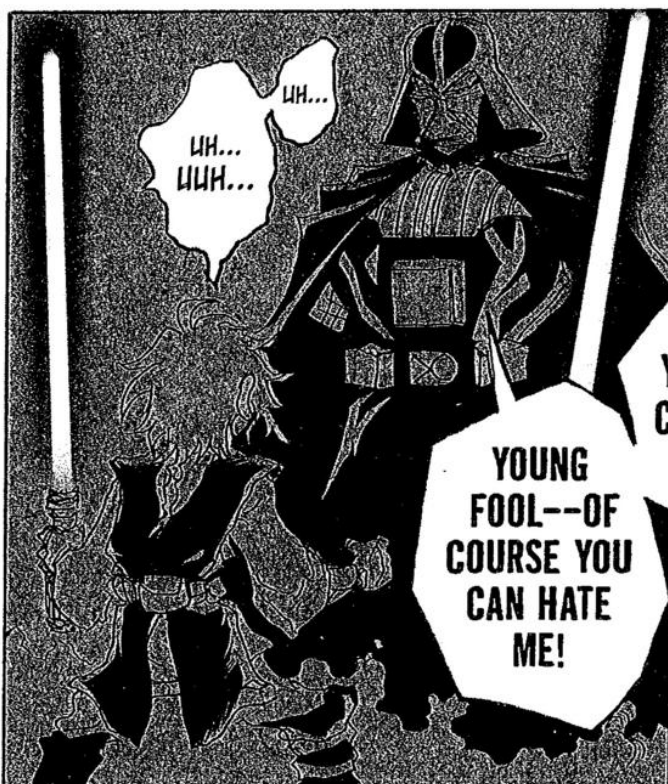
I CAN'T!

**I CAN'T
DO IT!**



**YOU MUST
HAVE HATRED
FOR ME.**

**AFTER
ALL...**



UH...
UH...
UH...

**YOU
CAN!**

**YOUNG
FOOL--OF
COURSE YOU
CAN HATE
ME!**

STORY

Failing to stop the destruction of the Death Star, Darth Vader received a reprimand from his Master, Emperor Palpatine. While Vader's forces search for the Rebel pilot who destroyed the battle station, Vader trains his student, Tao. Vader is trying to show Tao that the way to the dark side is through anger and hatred. However...

**I KILLED YOUR
PEOPLE...YOUR
FRIENDS...YOUR
PARENTS!**

**...I AM
THE ONE WHO
DESTROYED YOUR
HOME PLANET
OF SHUMARI.**

**I TOOK
EVERYTHING
FROM YOU!**

**REMEMBER
YOUR HATRED
AND ANGER
TOWARD ME.**

**BECOME
ANGRY!
HATE ME!**

UNNH...

**HAVE YOU
REMEMBERED,
TAO?!**



**THE ANGER AND
HATRED YOU SHOWED
ME THAT TIME...**

YES!



**STAND UP...
WEAKNESS
WILL NOT BE
TOLERATED.**



**WHY
MUST I
DO THIS?**

**I DON'T
WANT TO!**

I...

**N-NO.
NO!**



UH...



**THIS
IS YOUR
DESTINY.**

**IF YOU ARE
NOT STRONG, YOU
DON'T DESERVE
TO LIVE.**

**WEAKNESS
HAS NO PLACE
IN YOUR LIFE.**



**I SWEAR
I WILL
BECOME
POWERFUL!**

**I SWEAR
I'LL BECOME
STRONG! I
WON'T LOSE
TO ANYONE!**

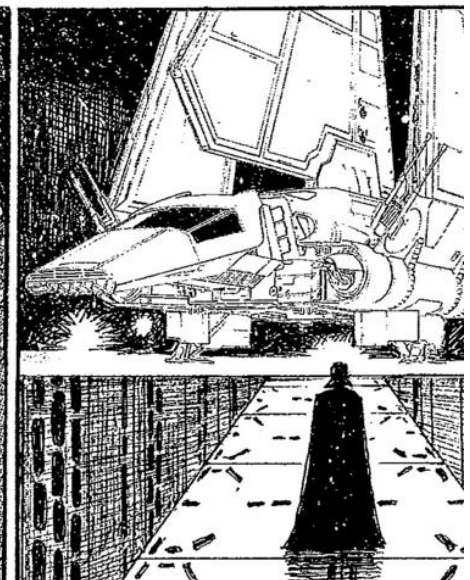
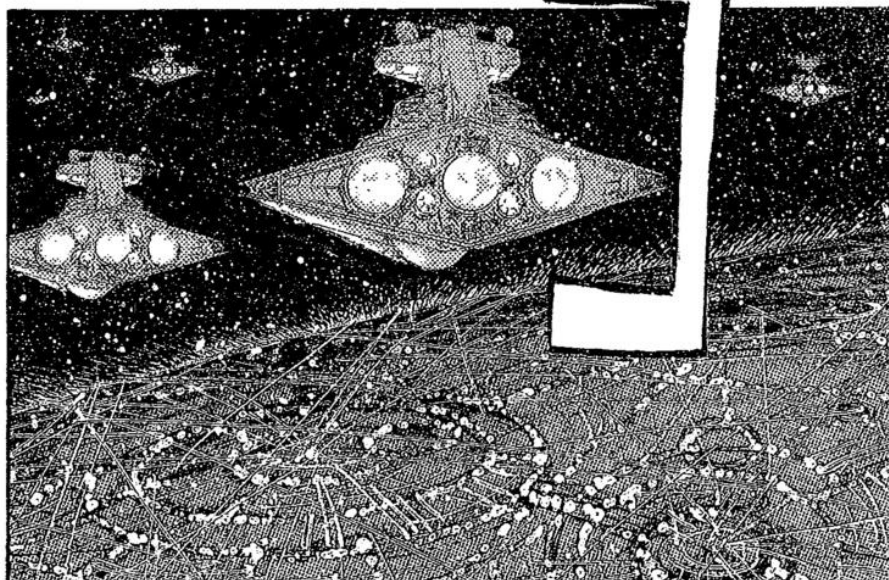
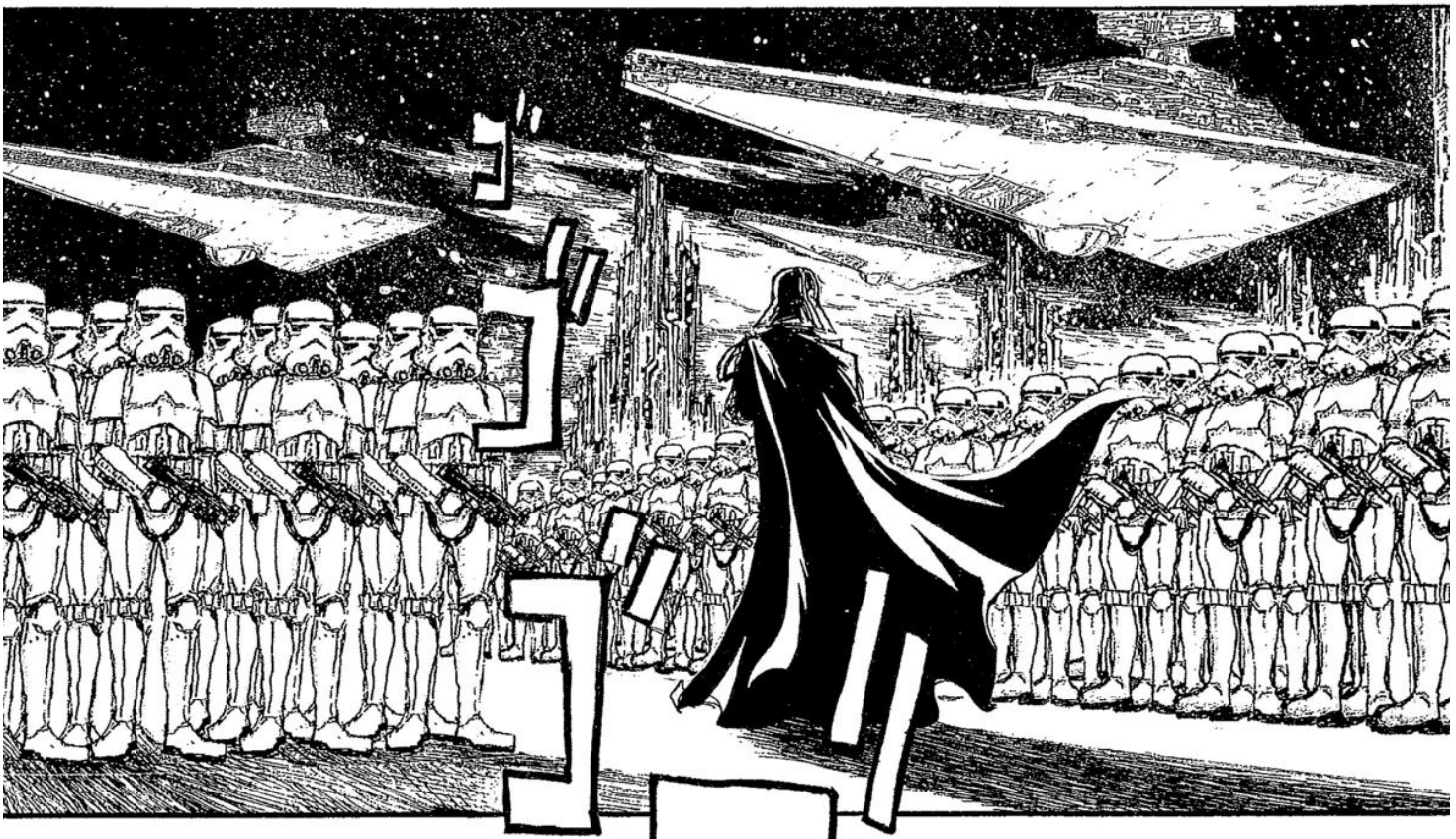
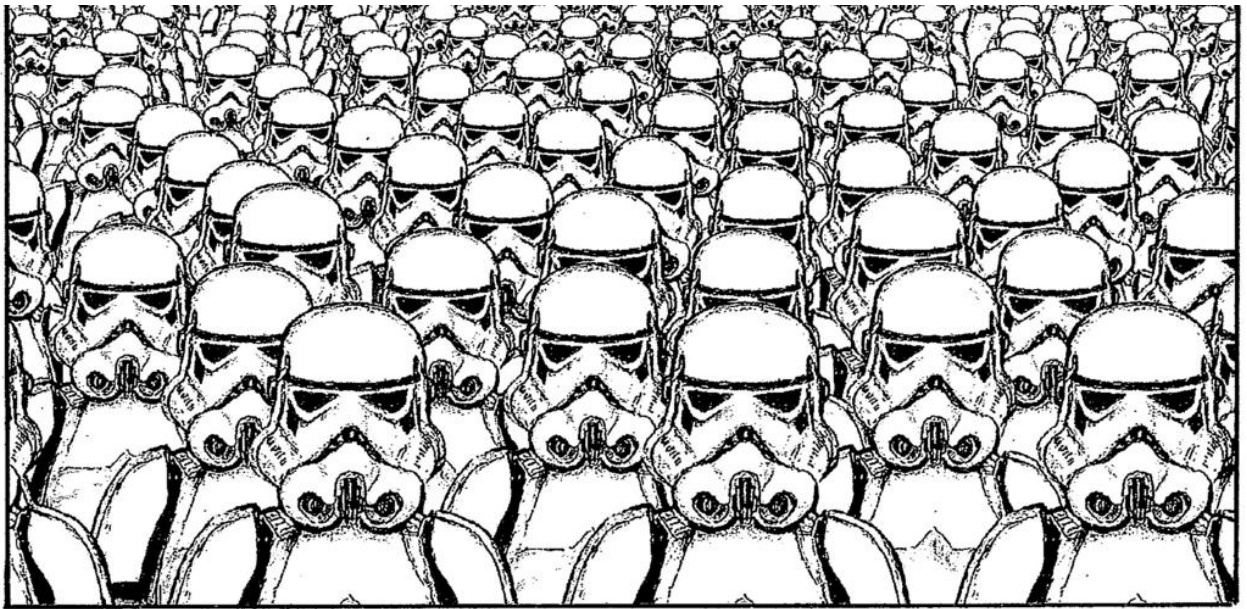
**VERY
WELL.**

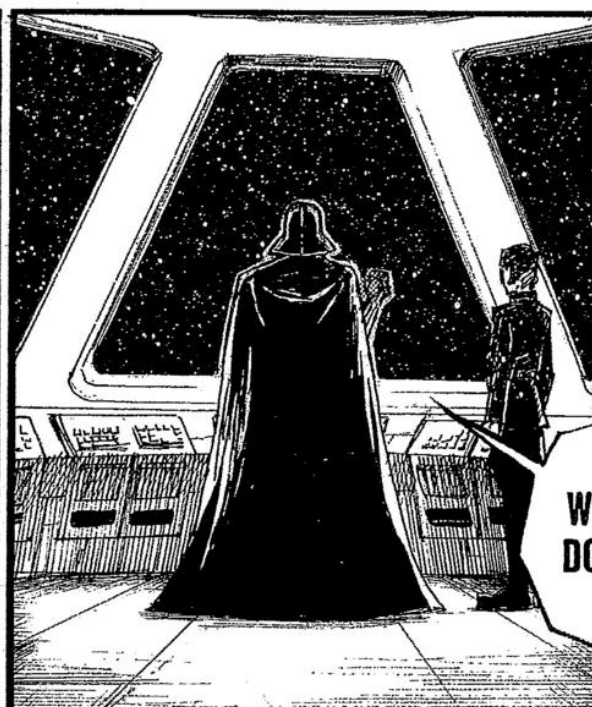
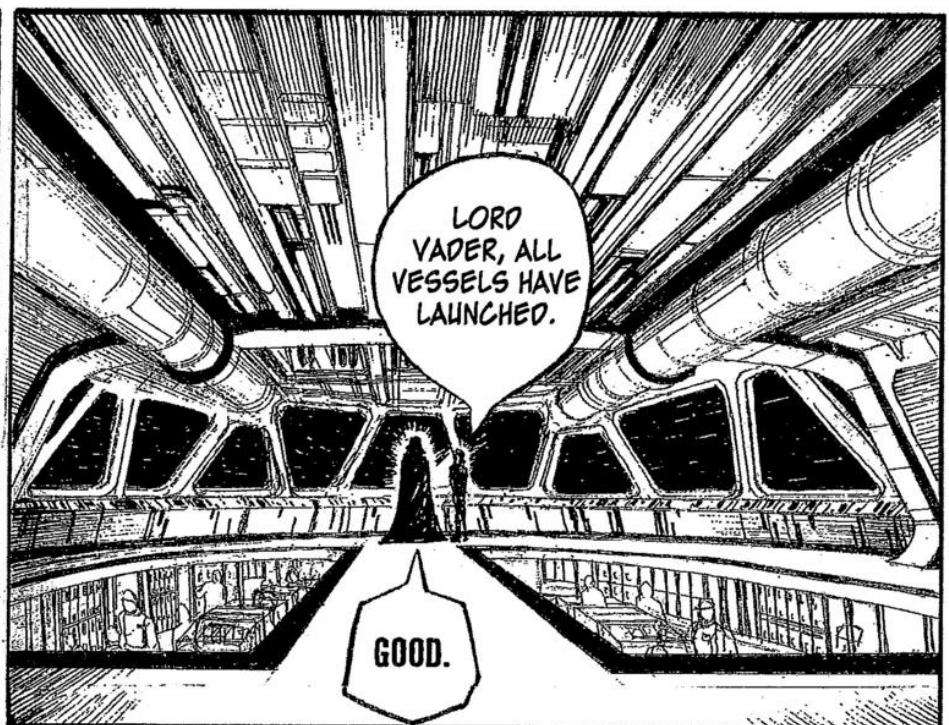
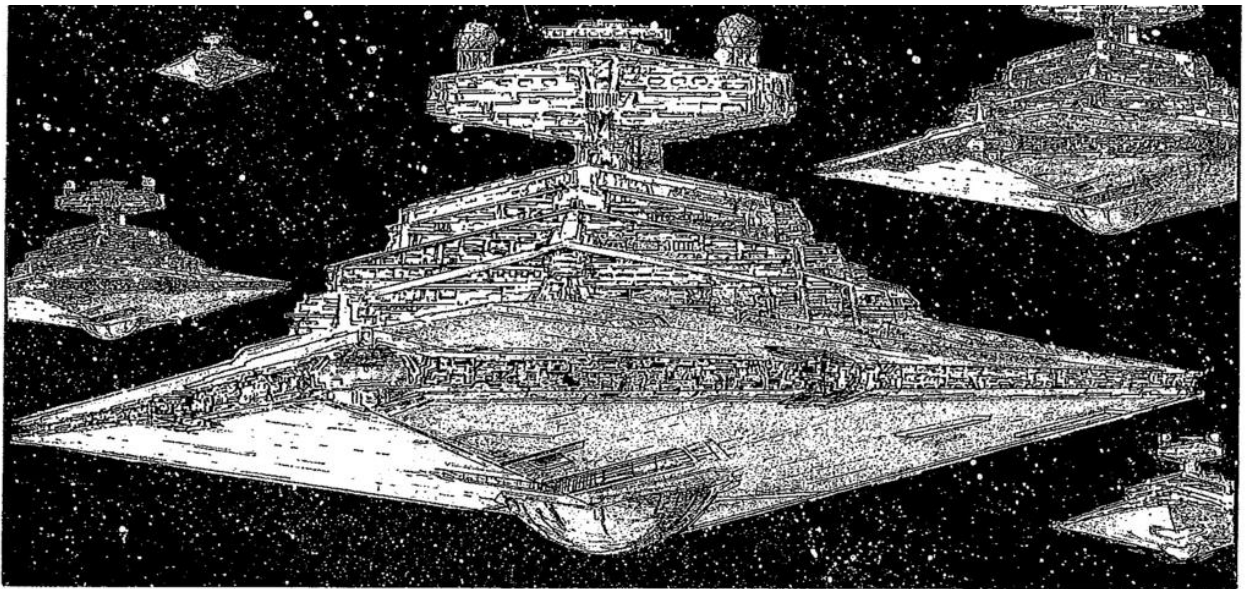


**I WILL
BECOME
STRONG!**



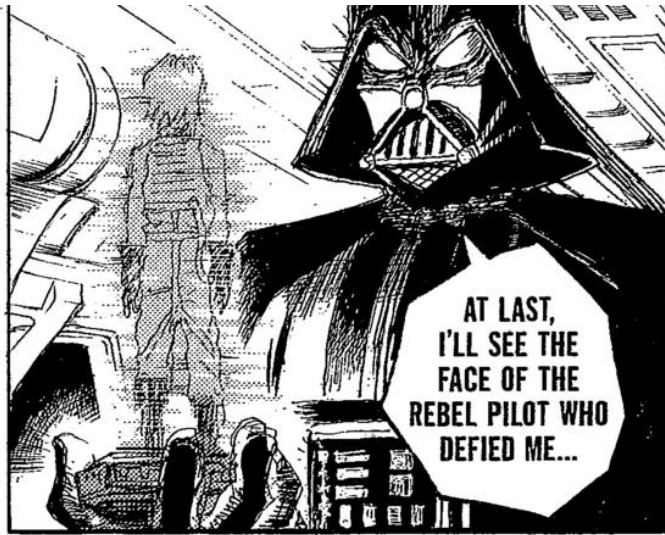
**THAT'S
ENOUGH FOR
TODAY.**



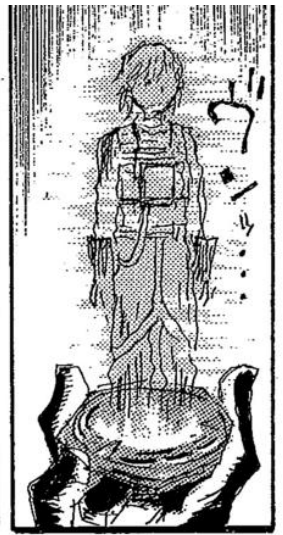




WHAT?!



AT LAST,
I'LL SEE THE
FACE OF THE
REBEL PILOT WHO
DEFIED ME...



JUST
NEVER

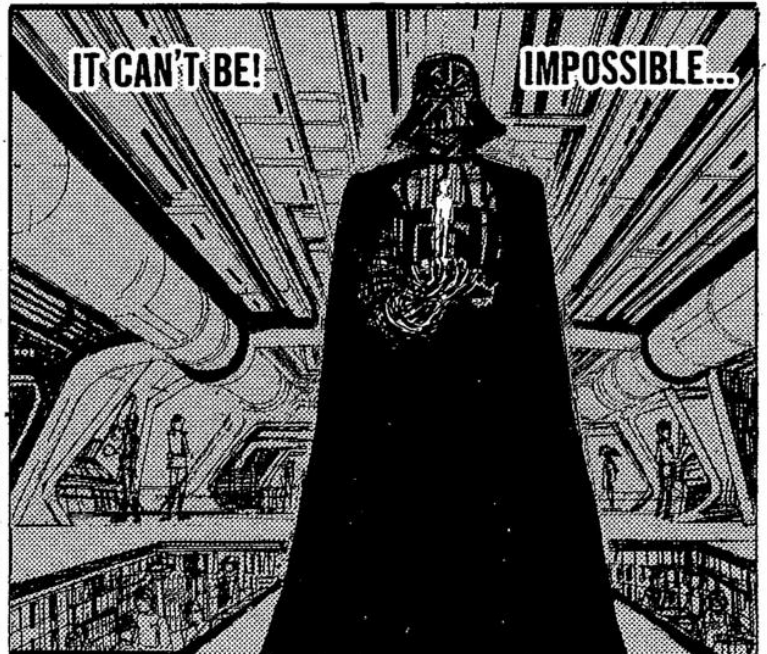
THE DEATH
STAR WAS
DESTROYED BY
THIS BOY?!

LUKE
SKYWALKER,
AGE 19?! THAT
NAME--!

IMPOSSIBLE
IT CAN'T BE!



BUT...



IT CAN'T BE!

IMPOSSIBLE...



...I FELT
SOMETHING
FAMILIAR...
IT BROUGHT
BACK OLD
MEMORIES...

BUT WHEN
WE CAPTURED
THE CORELLIAN
SMUGGLER'S
SHIP...



WAIT...



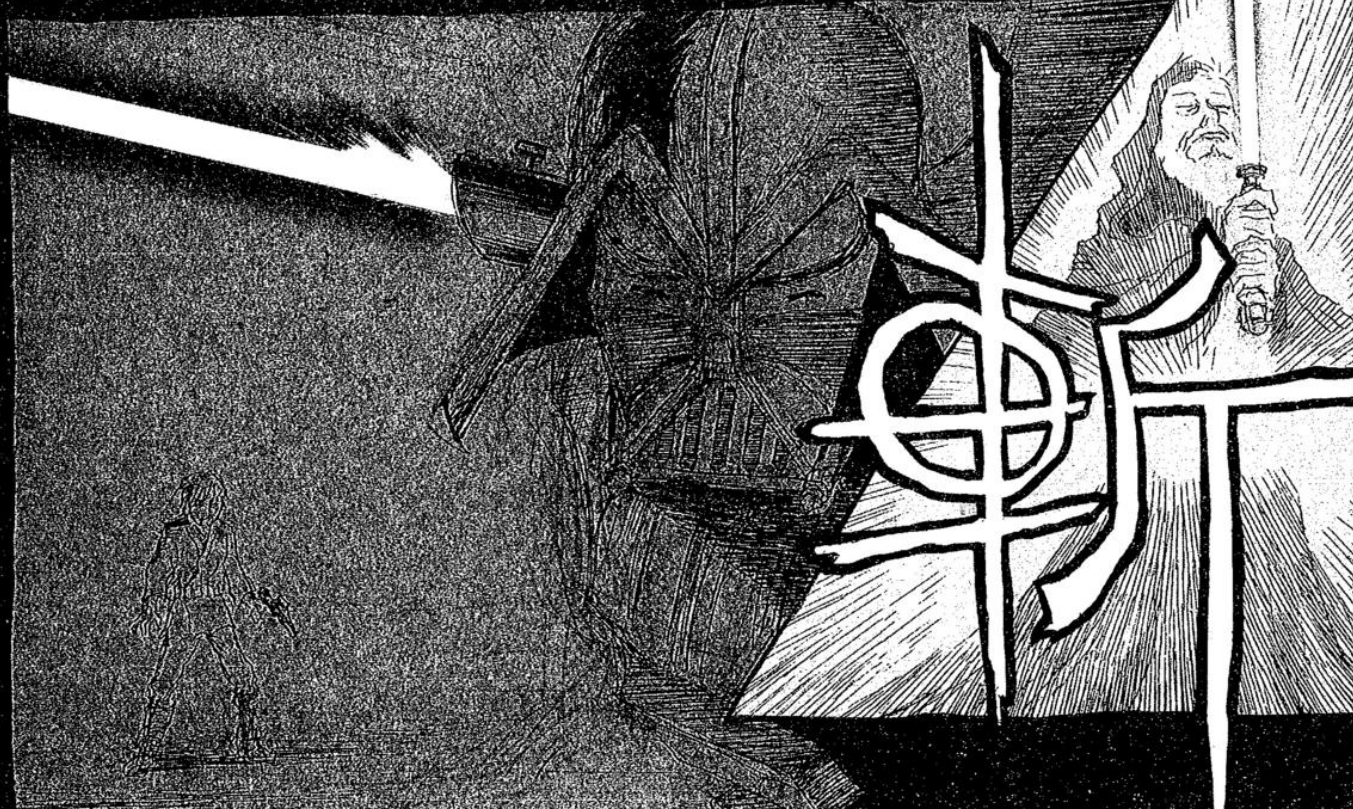
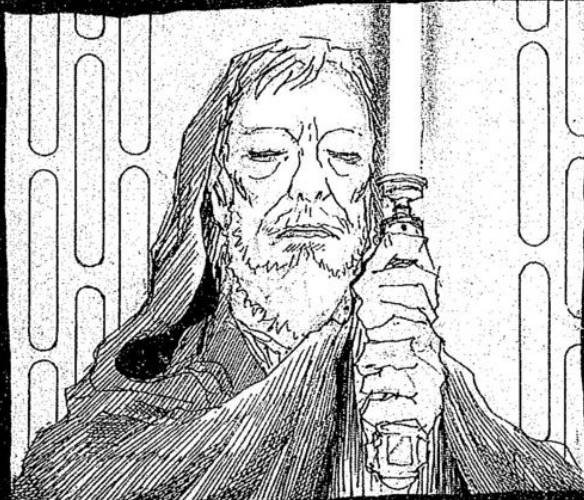
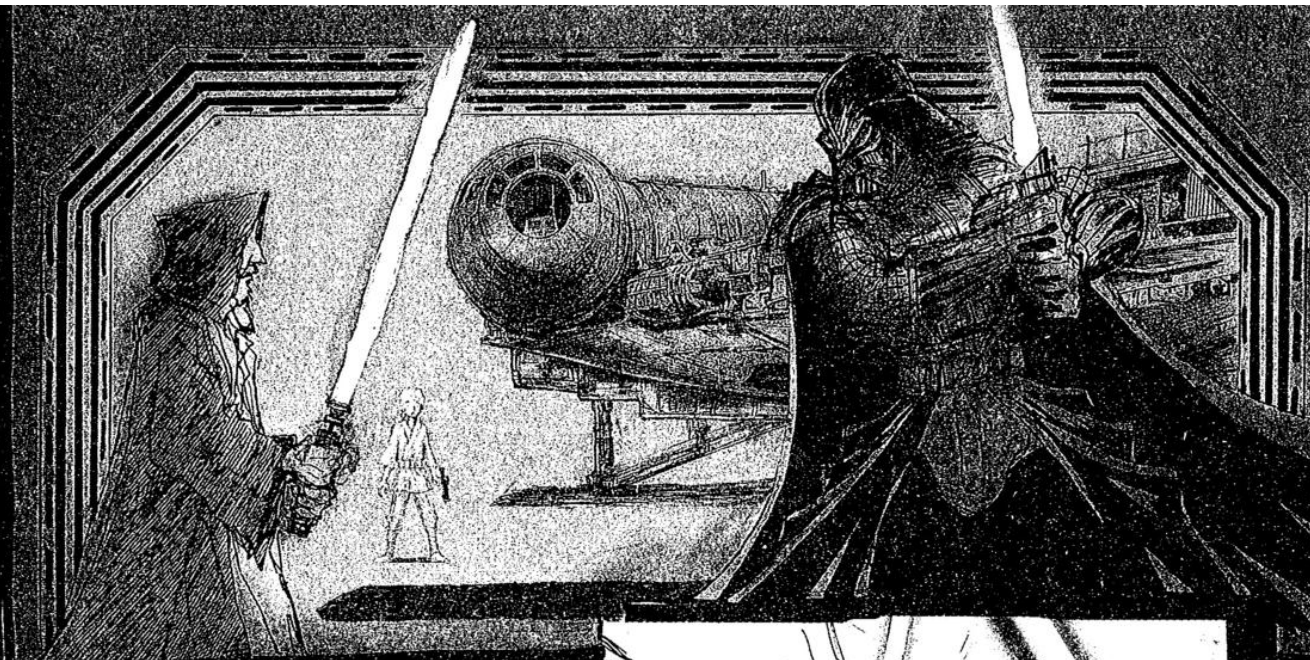
...BUT WHAT
IF IT WAS
EVEN MORE
THAN THAT?

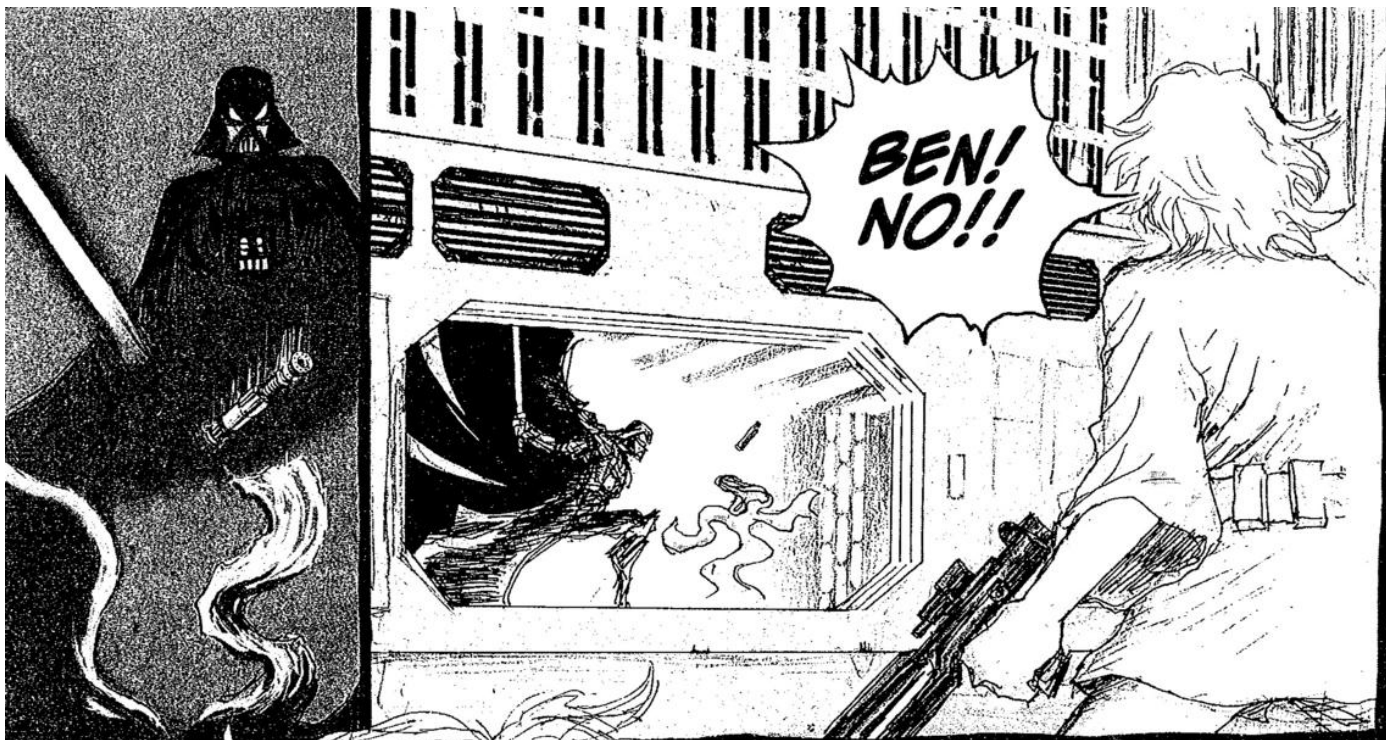
I THOUGHT IT
WAS MERELY
THE PRESENCE
OF MY OLD
MASTER, OBI-
WAN...

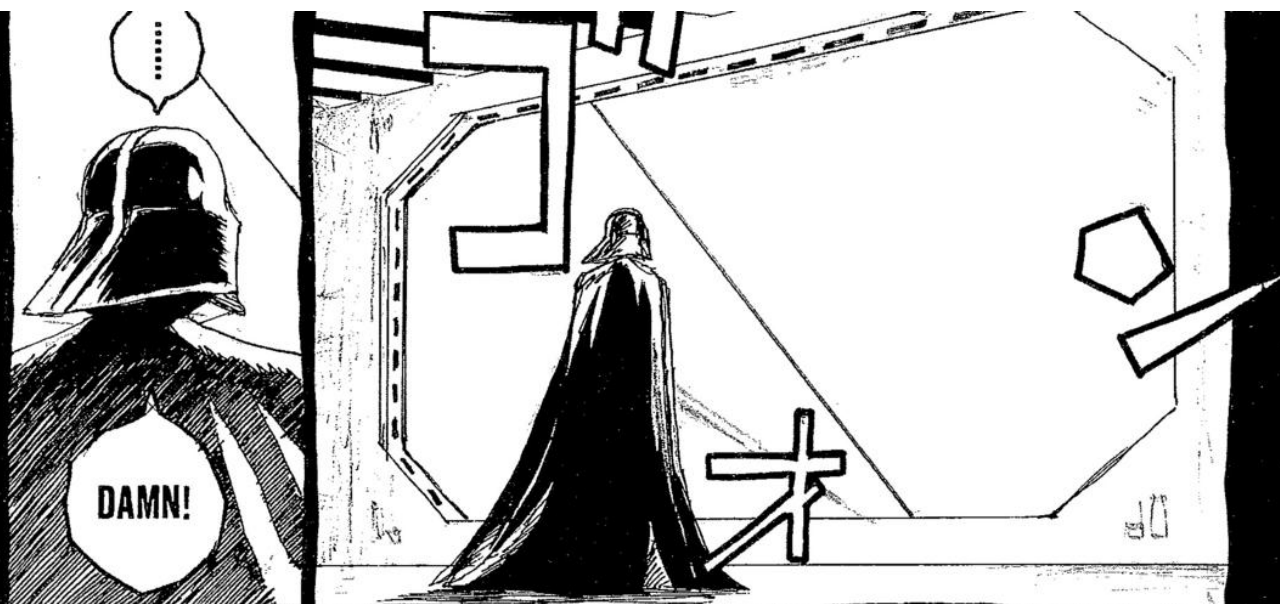


...WHAT--?

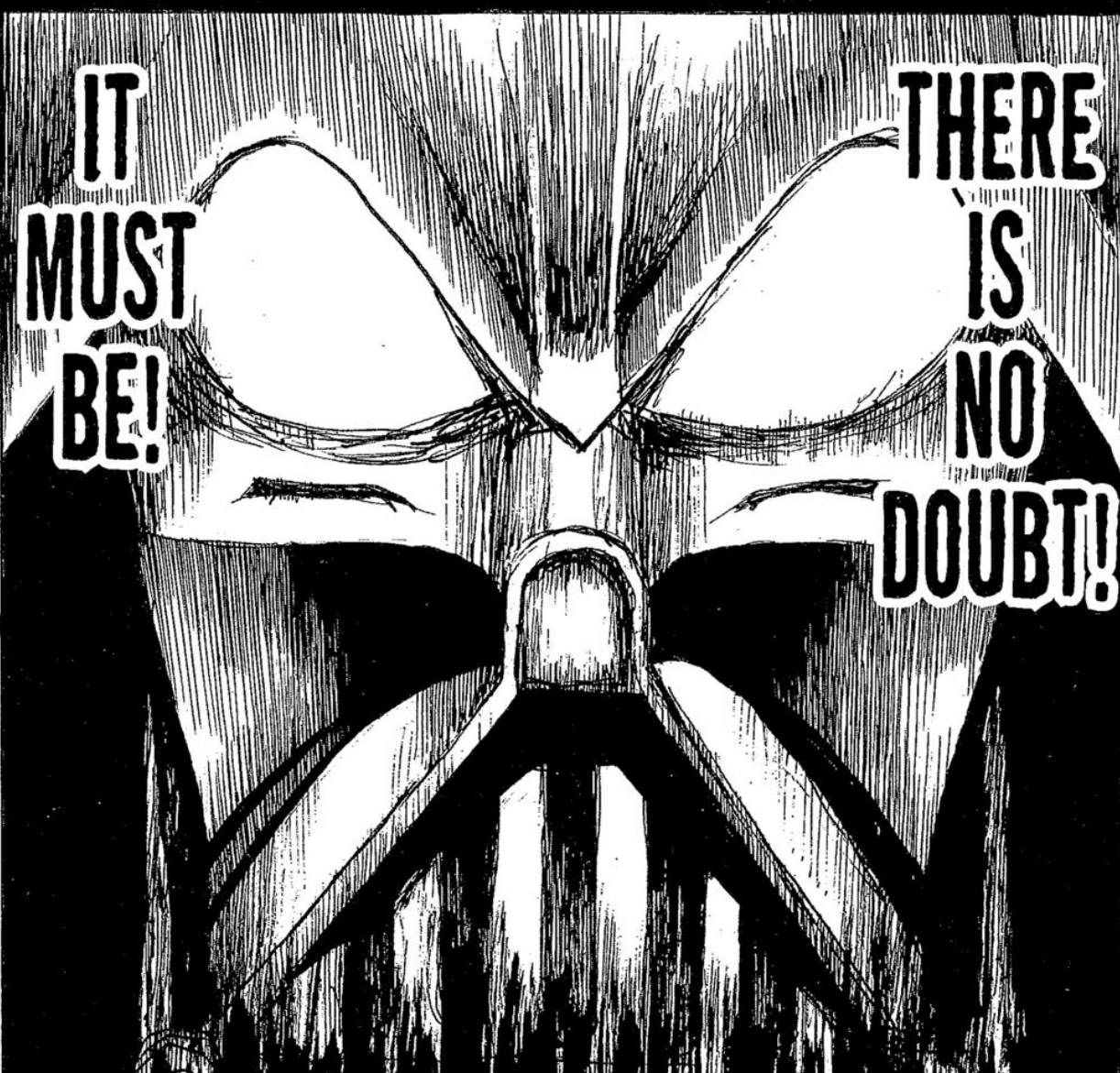
BUT...







IT'S HIM!



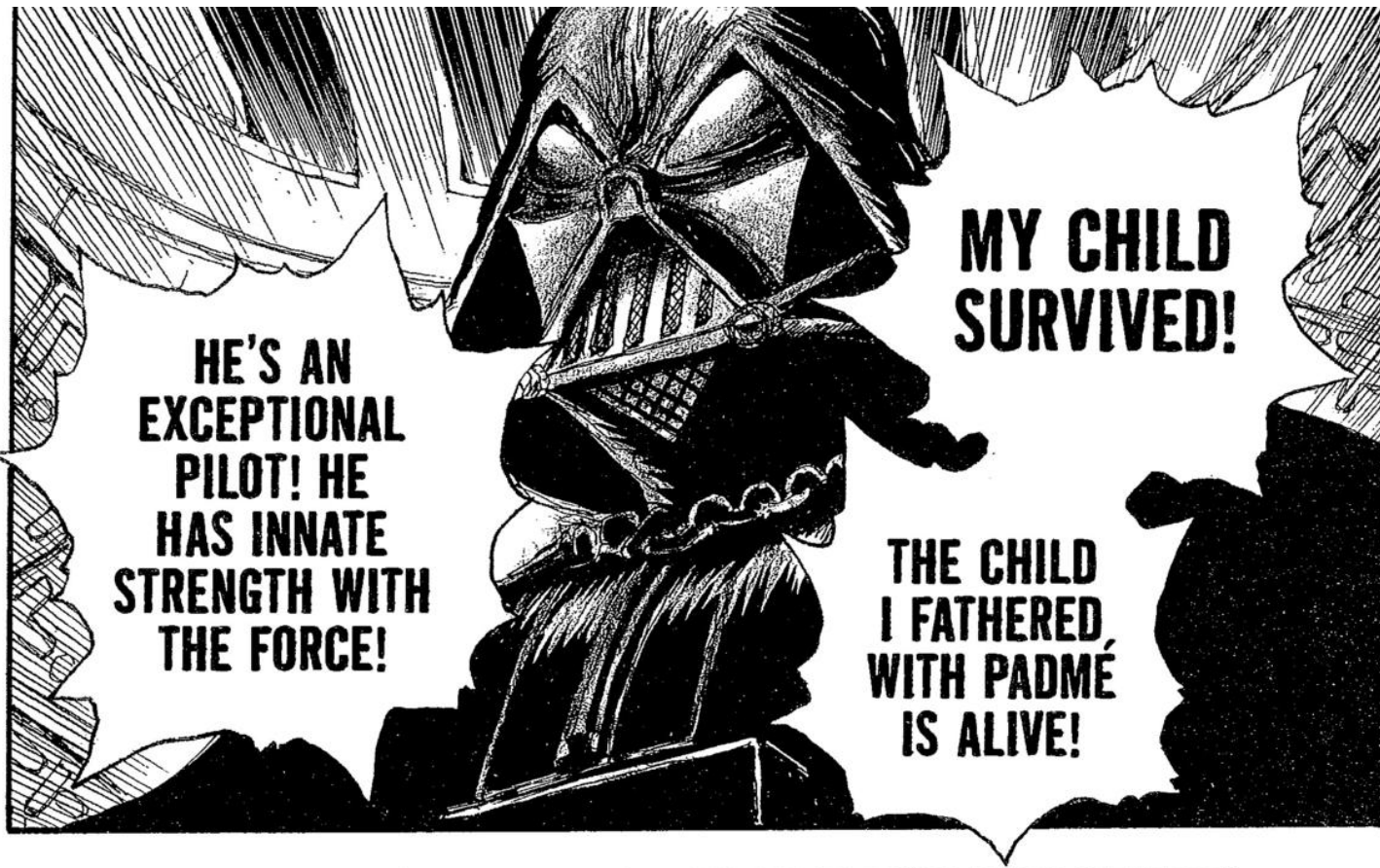
YES!

**OF
COURSE!**

YES!

NOOOO

**BUT AT
LAST, ALL IS
REVEALED
TO ME!**



**HE'S AN
EXCEPTIONAL
PILOT! HE
HAS INNATE
STRENGTH WITH
THE FORCE!**

**MY CHILD
SURVIVED!**

**THE CHILD
I FATHERED
WITH PADMÉ
IS ALIVE!**



**WA
HA
HA
HA!!**

**THOUGH I
CAN ALSO
SEE SOME
OF PADMÉ...**

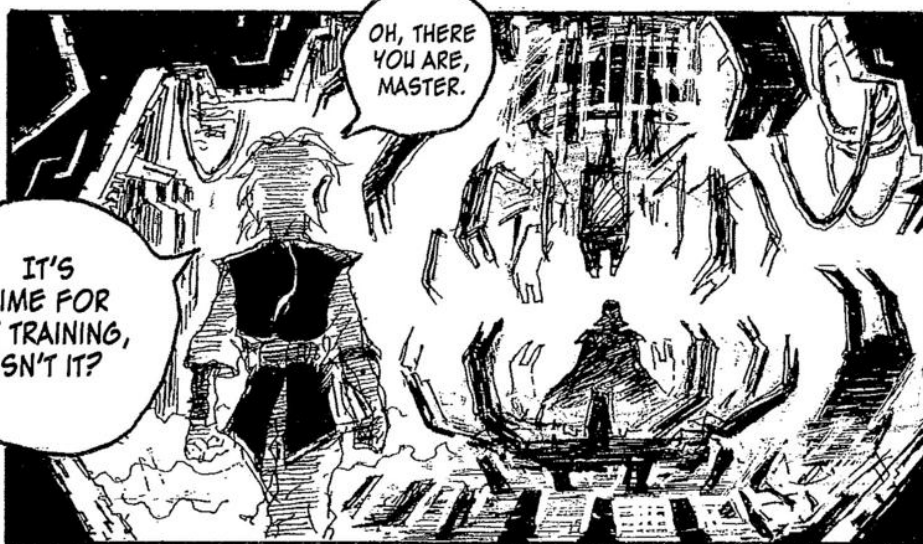
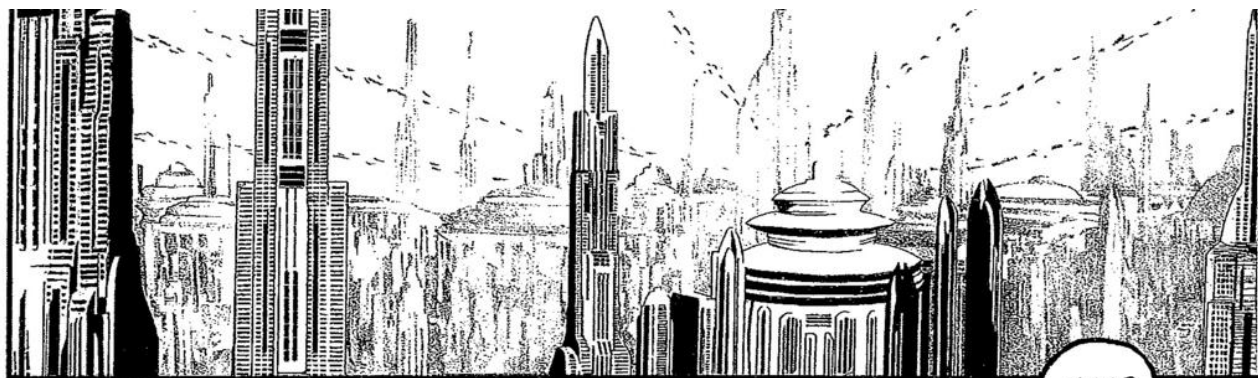
**HE EVEN
LOOKS LIKE
ME AT THAT
AGE!**



**I'M
COMING
FOR YOU,
MY SON!**

**JUST YOU
WAIT, LUKE
SKYWALKER!**

**UN-
BELIEV-
ABLE!**



IT'S
TIME FOR
MY TRAINING,
ISN'T IT?

OH, THERE
YOU ARE,
MASTER.



HUH?

MASTER
VADER?



HUH? ARE...
ARE YOU
FEELING ILL,
MASTER?



...

I-I'M
READY!

I'VE BEEN
PRACTICING
AS YOU TOLD
ME!



TH--
THEN...
YOU MEAN...

...MY
TRAINING
IS...

...OVER
...?

?



YOU'RE ON
YOUR OWN
FROM NOW
ON.

I HAVE NO
MORE TIME
FOR YOU,
BOY.

WHAT?!

NO...

M-MASTER
VADER...

GO
WHEREVER YOU
LIKE AND DO AS
YOU WISH.



HORRIBLE...

THAT'S
HOR-
RIBLE...

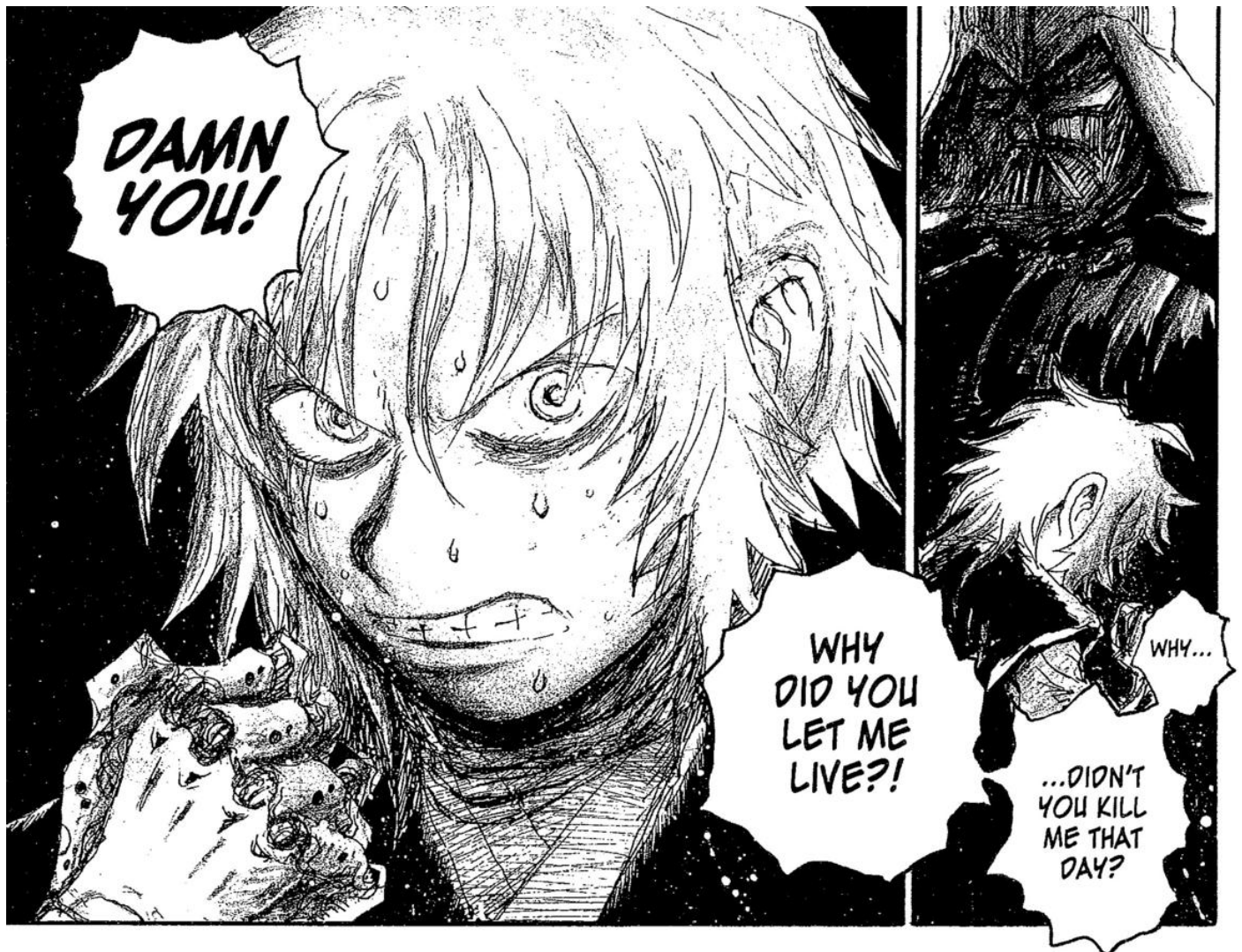


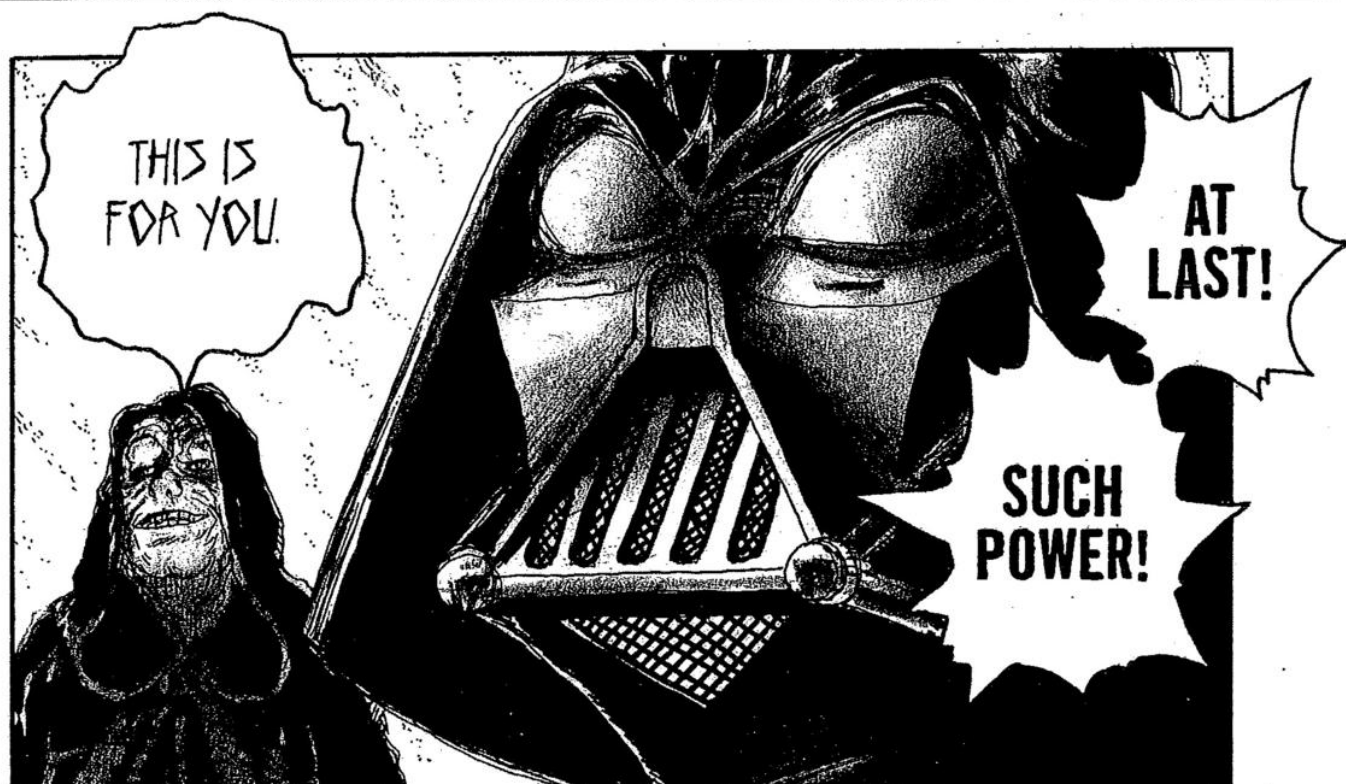
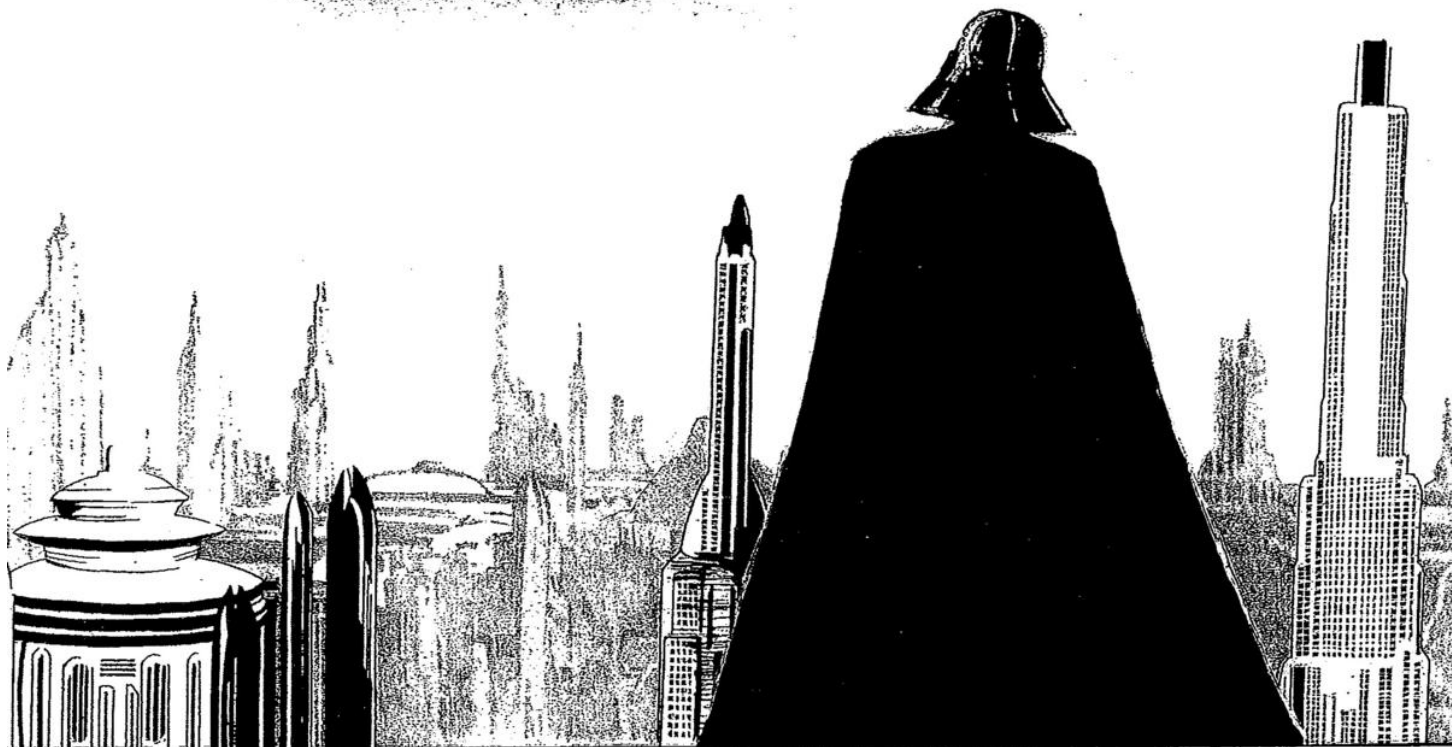
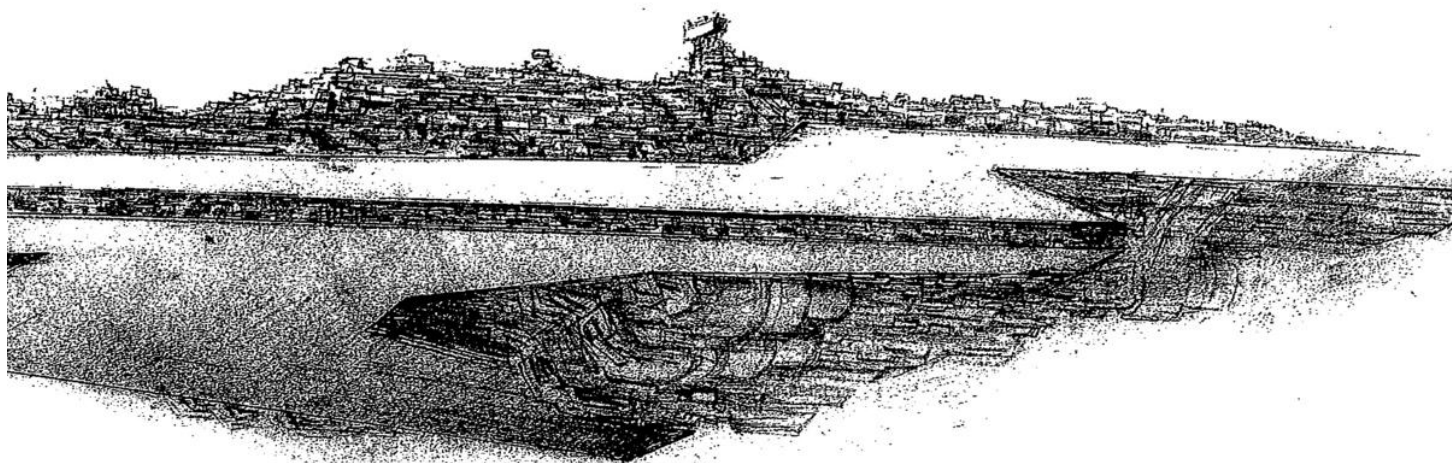
...WHERE
AM I
SUPPOSED
TO GO?

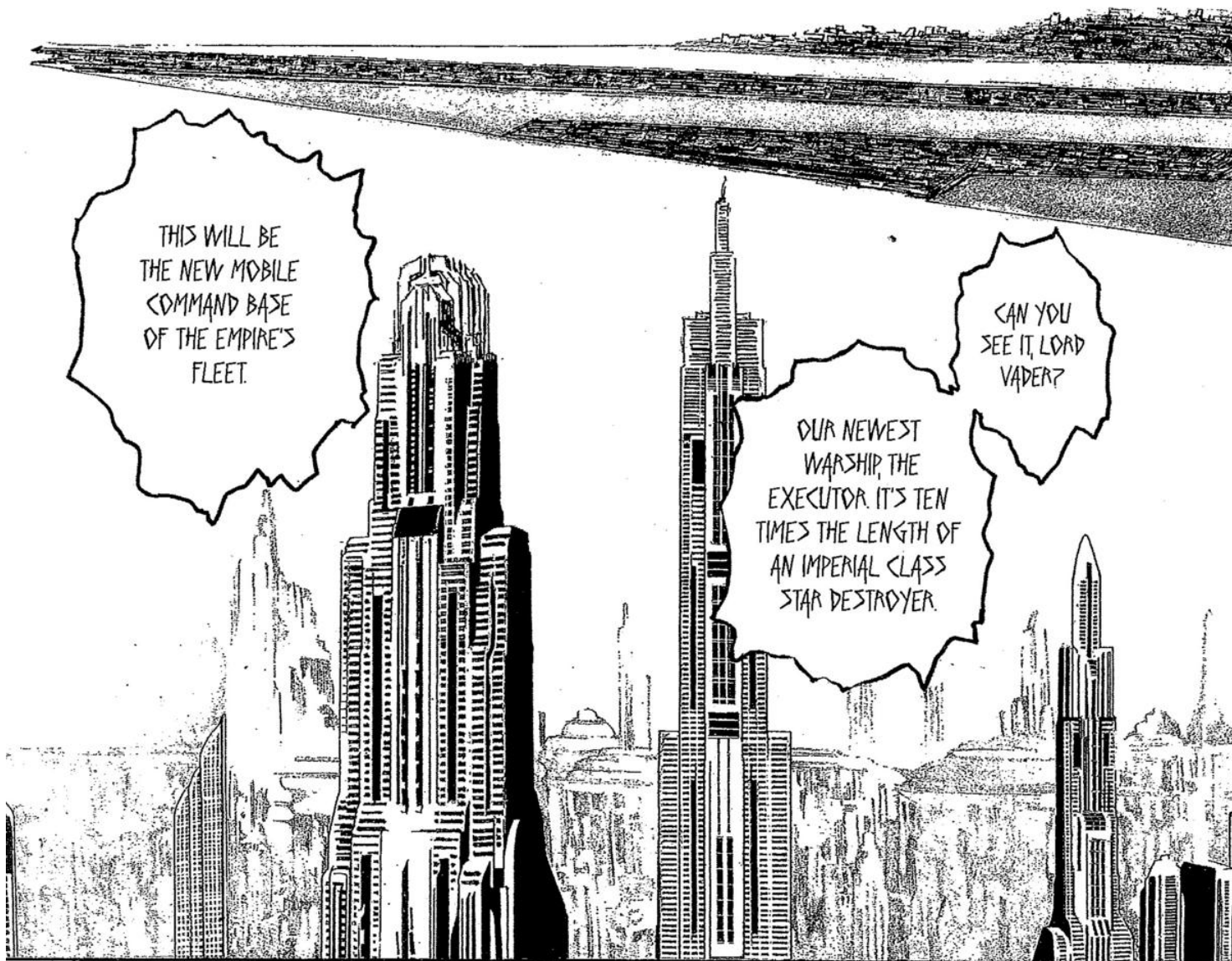
WHERE...



I HAVE
NO USE FOR
YOU ANY-
MORE.







THIS WILL BE
THE NEW MOBILE
COMMAND BASE
OF THE EMPIRE'S
FLEET.

CAN YOU
SEE IT, LORD
VADER?

OUR NEWEST
WARSHIP, THE
EXECUTOR. IT'S TEN
TIMES THE LENGTH OF
AN IMPERIAL CLASS
STAR DESTROYER.

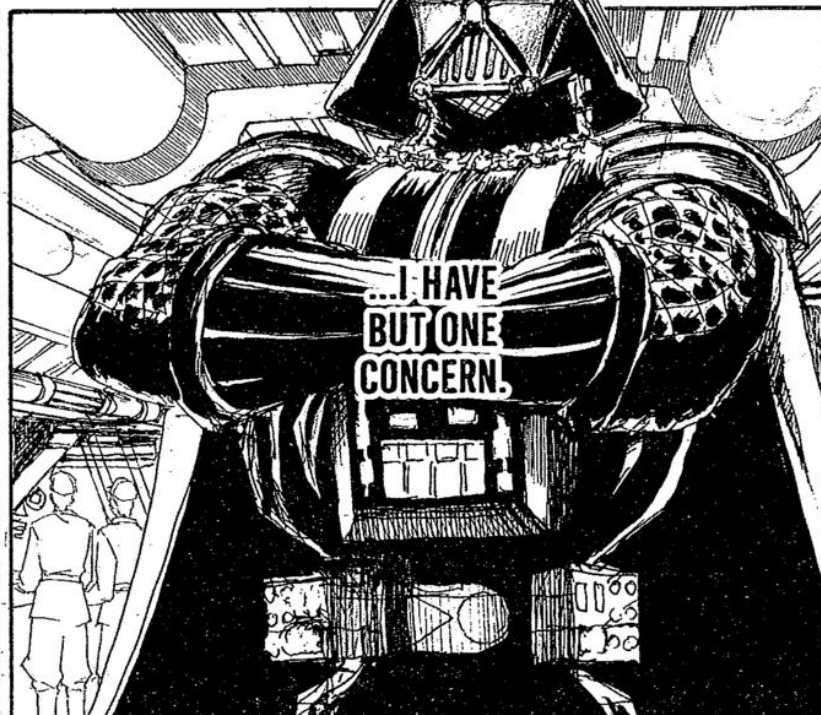
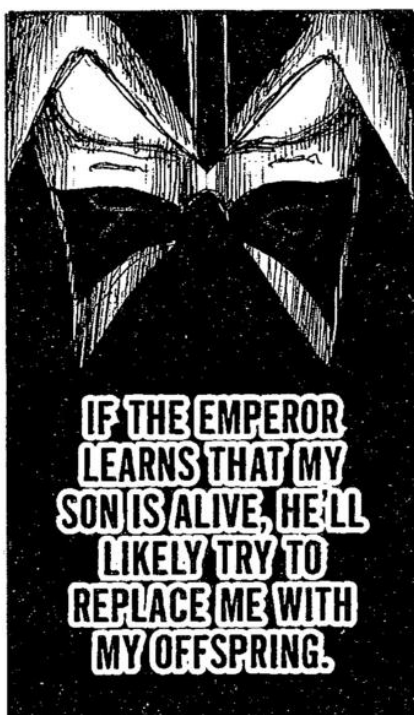
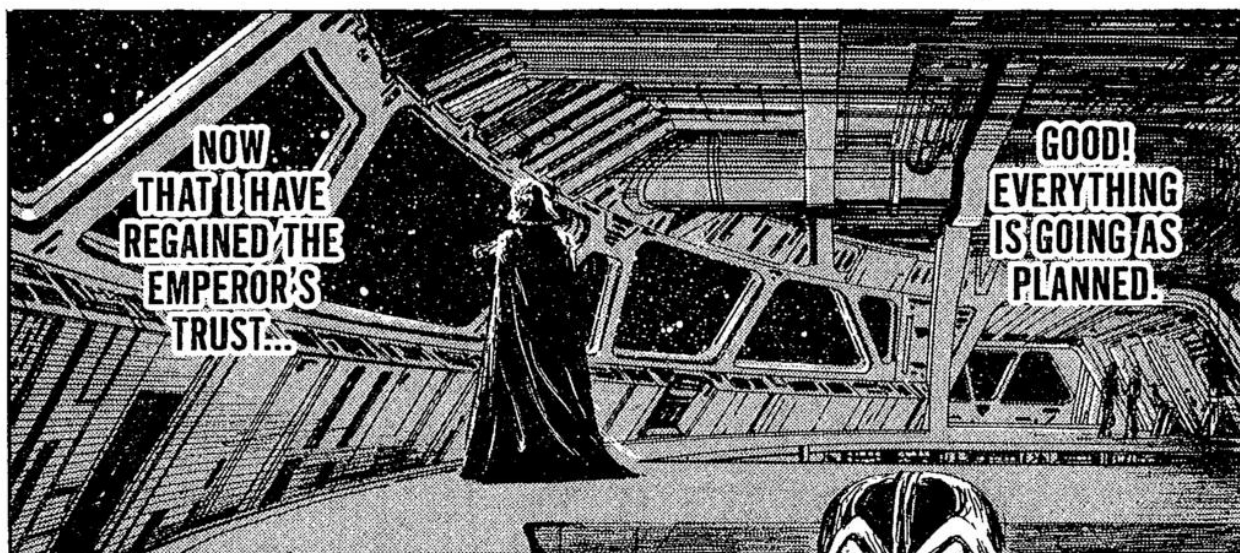
NOW GO,
SITH LORD
DARTH VADER!

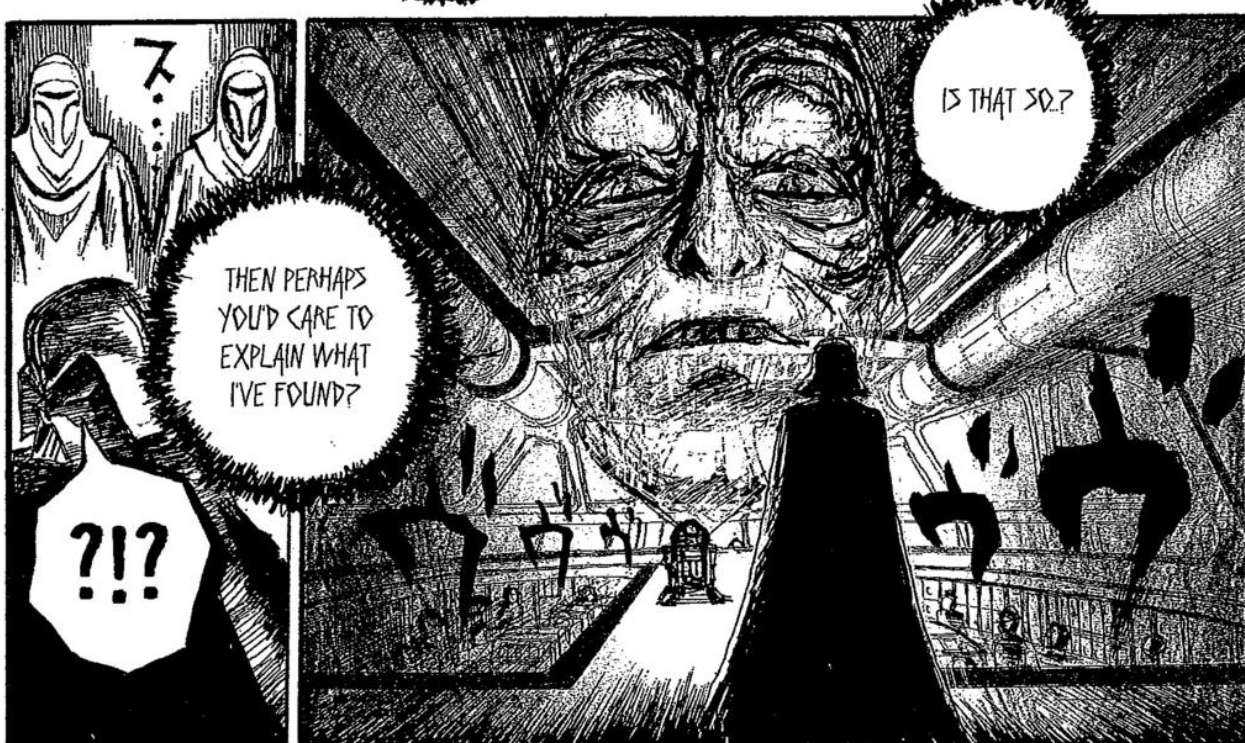
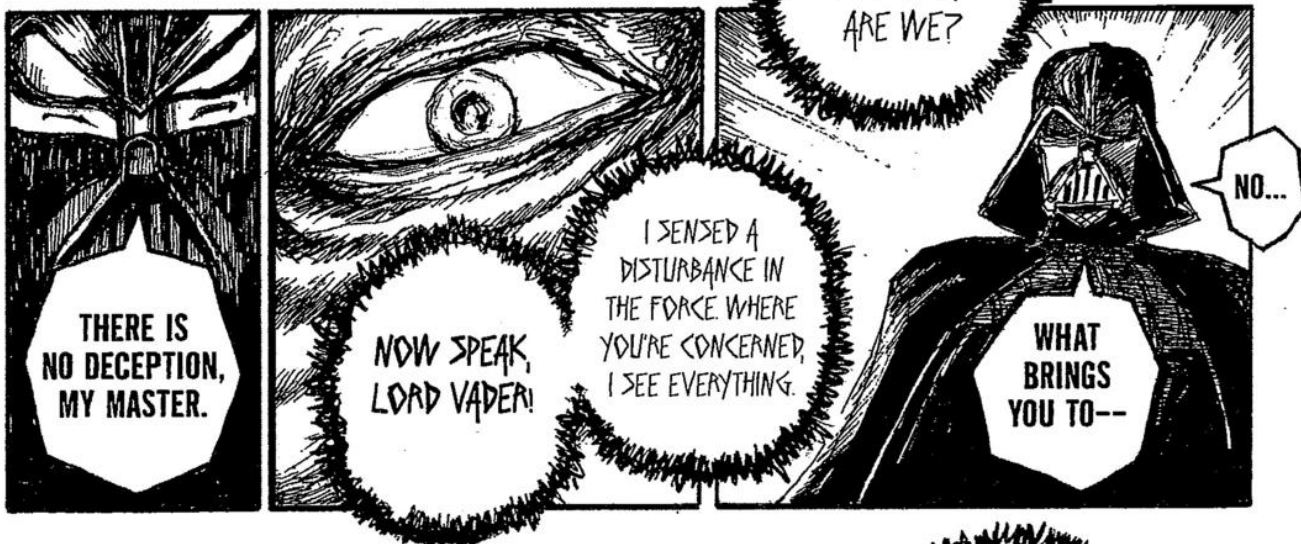
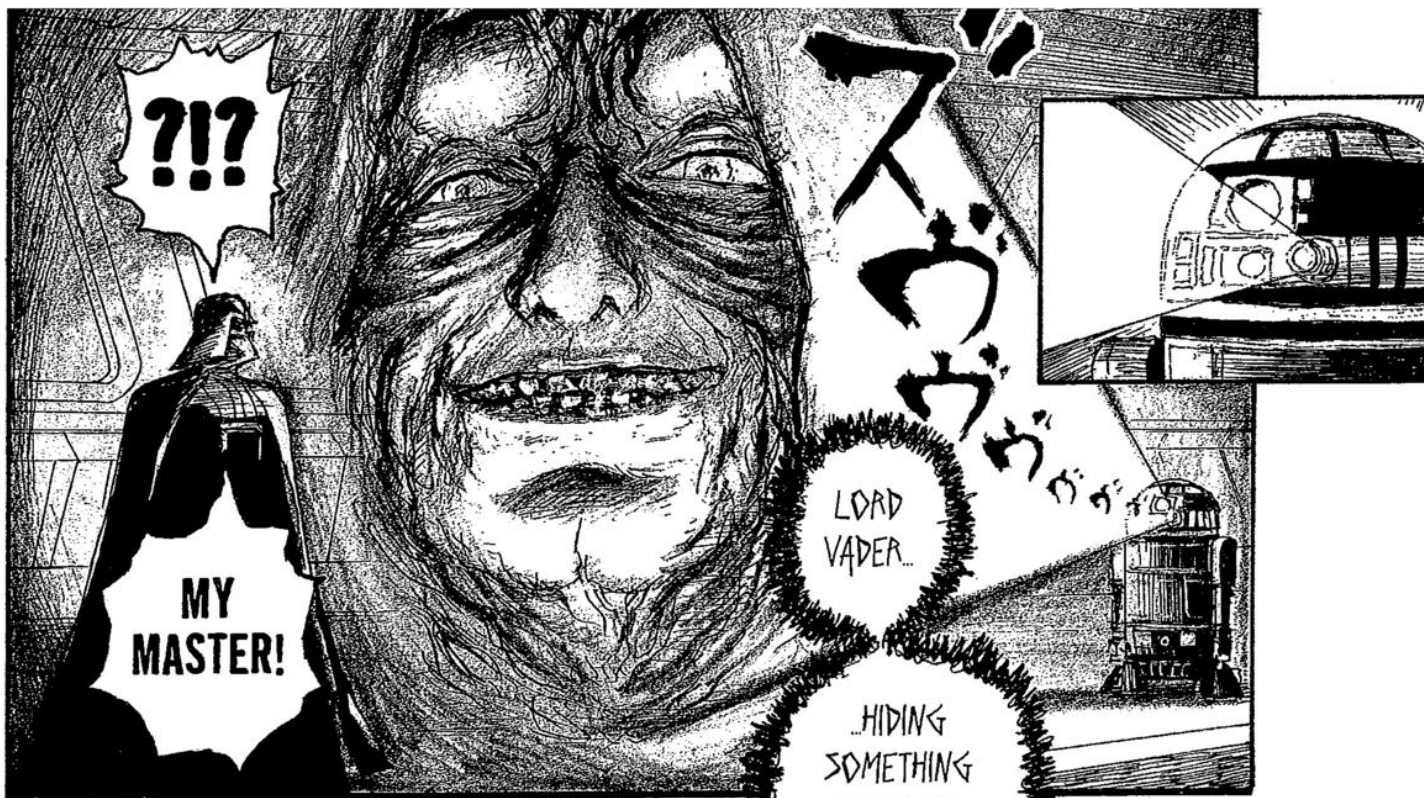
YOU AND
THIS SHIP ARE
SYMBOLS OF
FEAR.

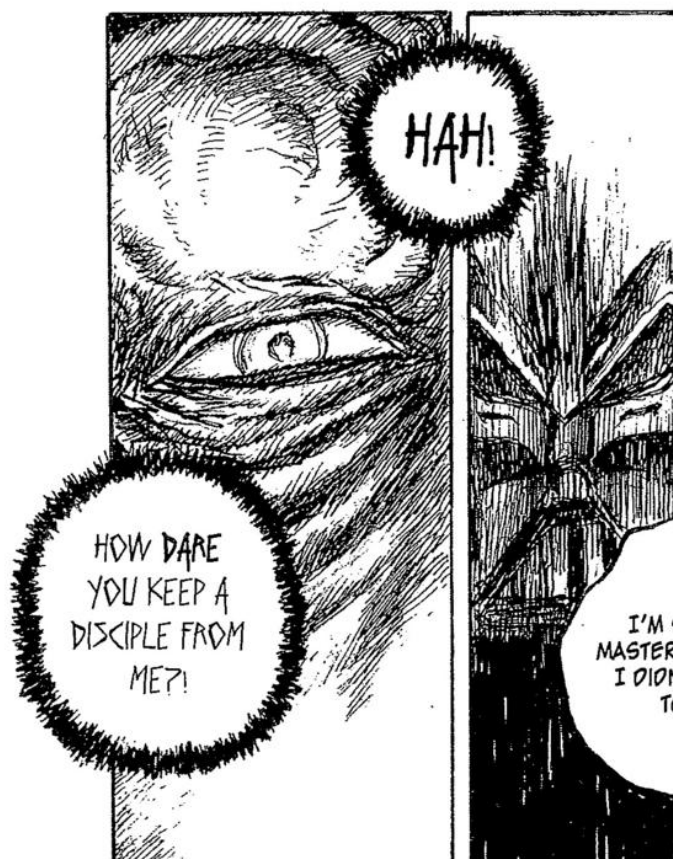
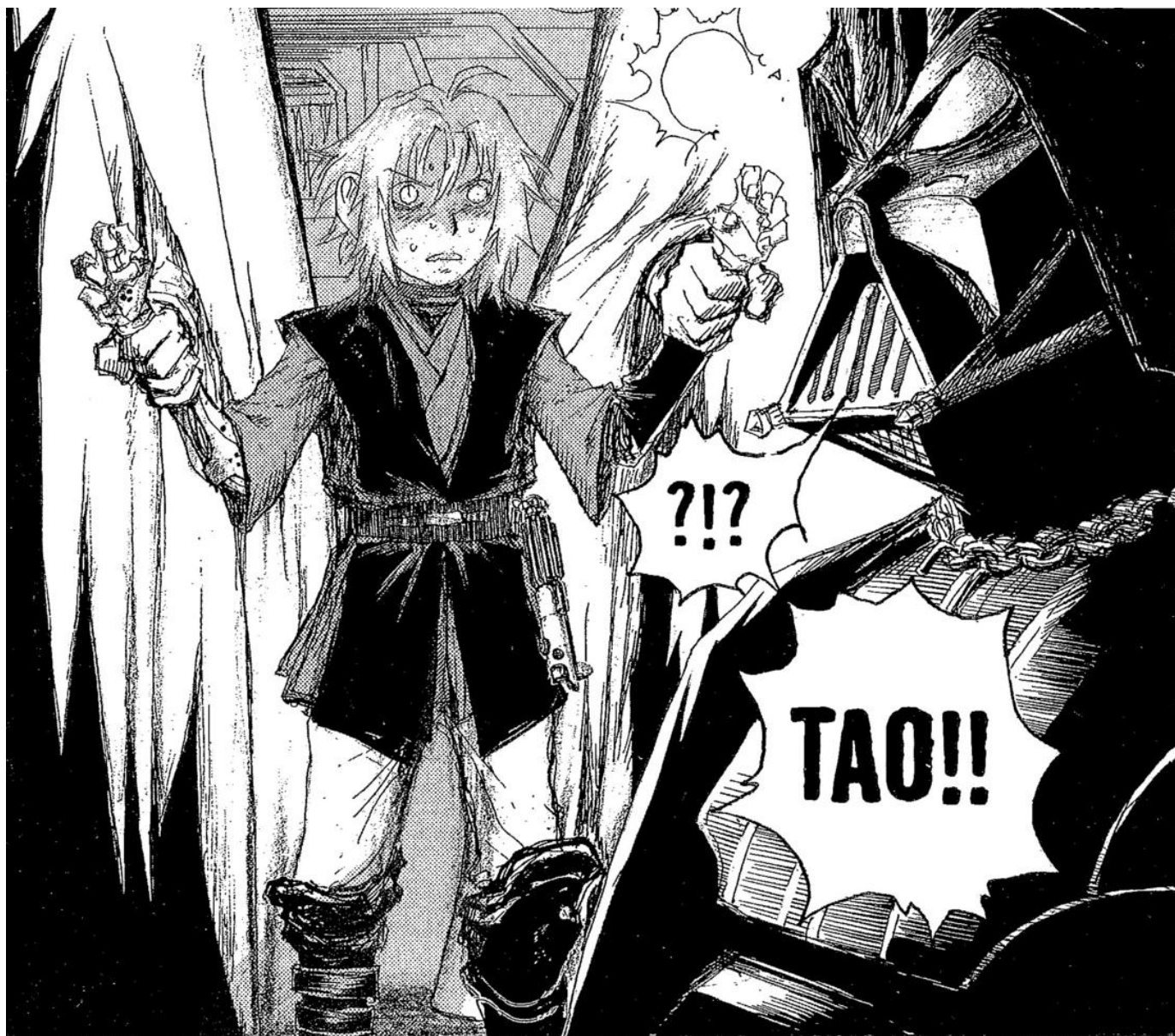
THE ENTIRE
GALAXY WILL
QUIVER IN YOUR
WAKE!

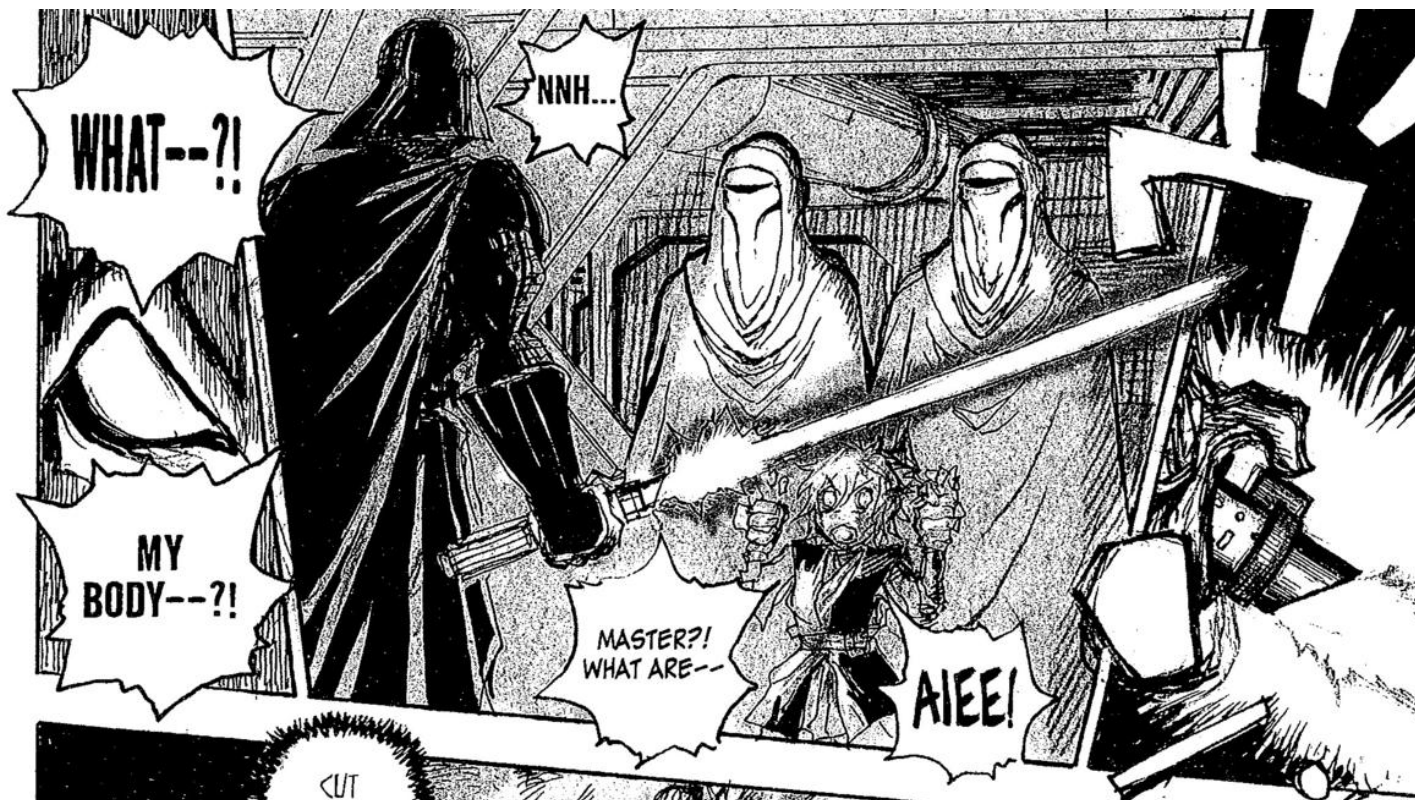
YOU
HONOR
ME, MY
MASTER!

INDEED.









WHAT--?!

NNH...

MY
BODY--?!

MASTER?!
WHAT ARE--

AIEE!



CUT
THROUGH...

...YOUR OWN
WEAKNESS!

NOW, CUT
HIM DOWN,
VADER!



PLEASE--
STOP...

NN!

MY
MASTER--
STOP!

NNH...

HHN...

I CAN'T
CONTROL
MY BODY...

STRIKE
HIM.

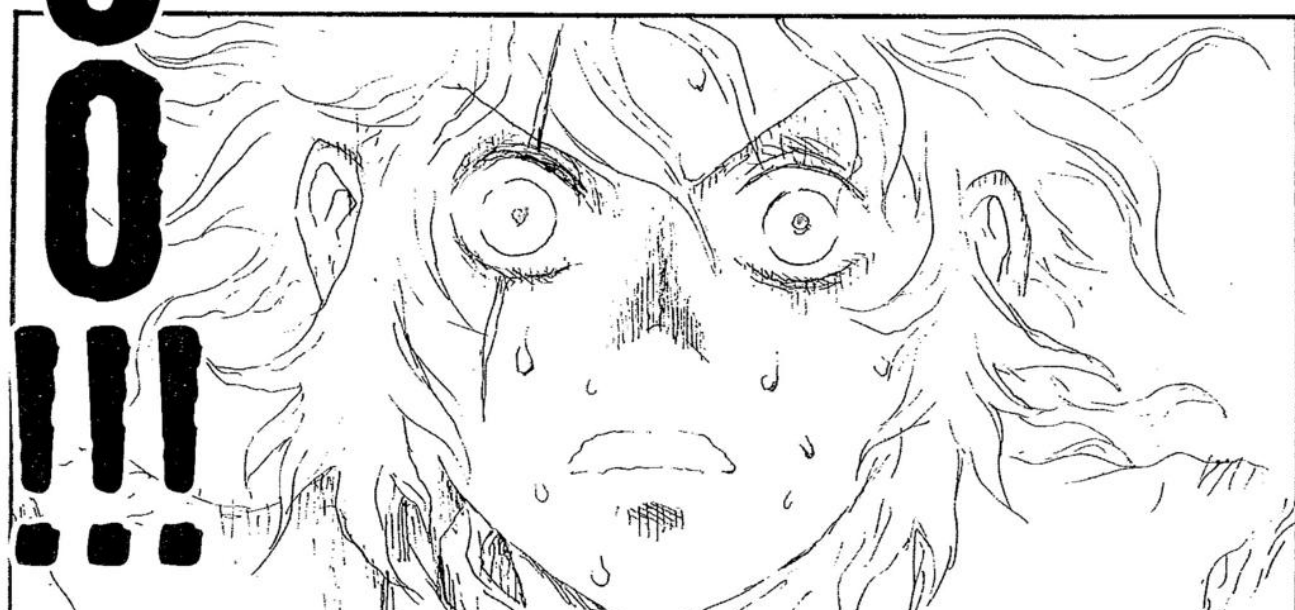
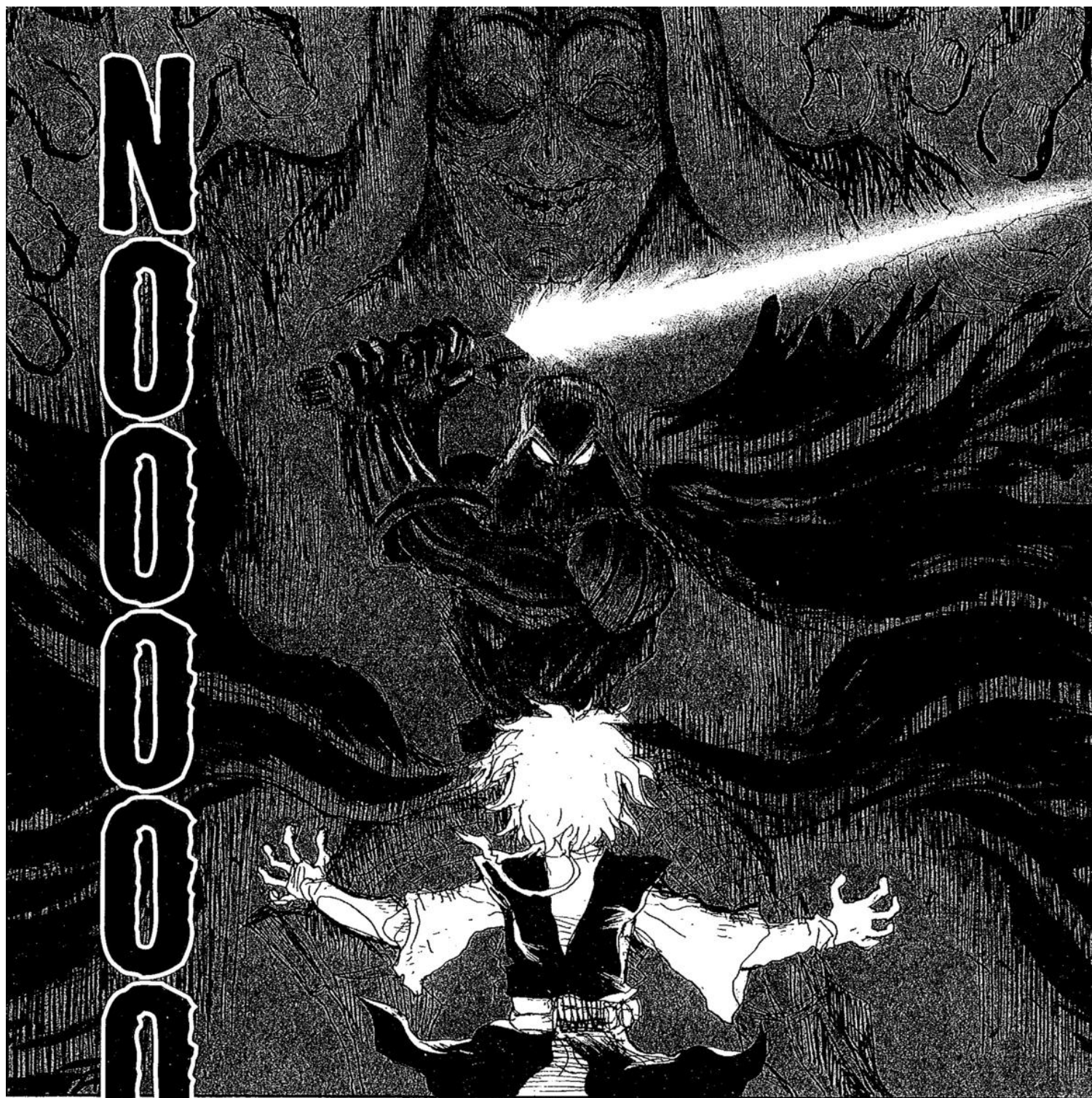
NO!!

STRIKE
HIM DOWN.

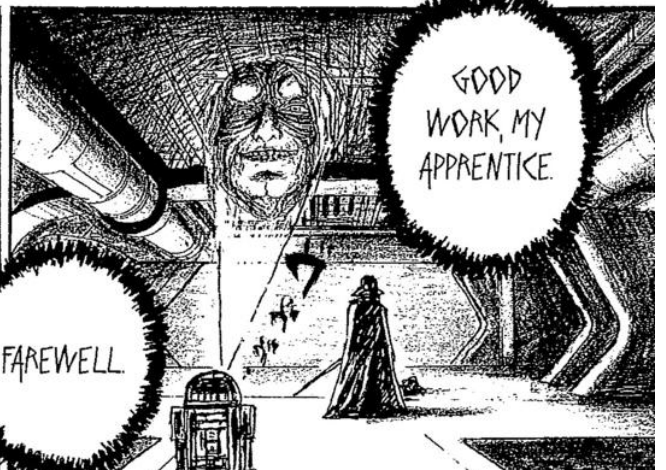
AH...

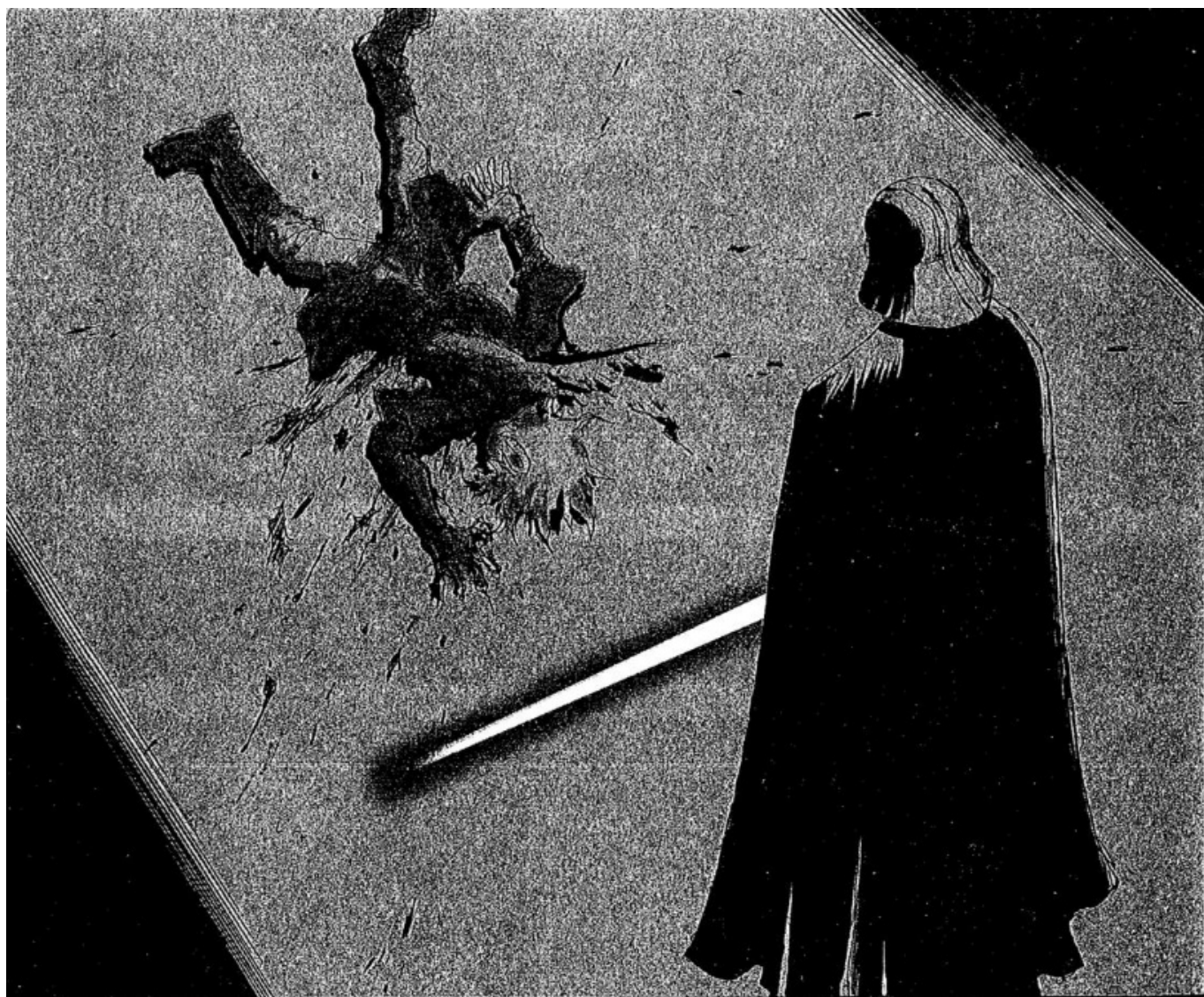
AHH...

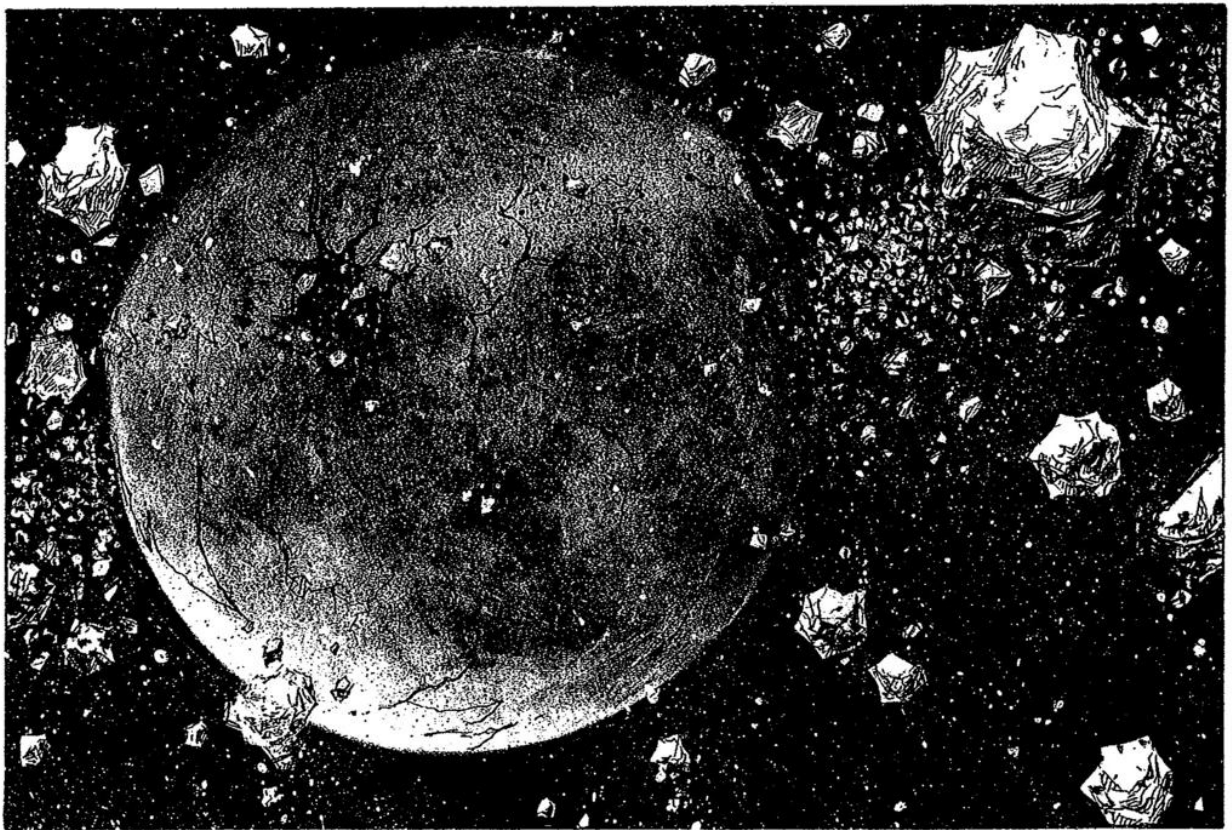
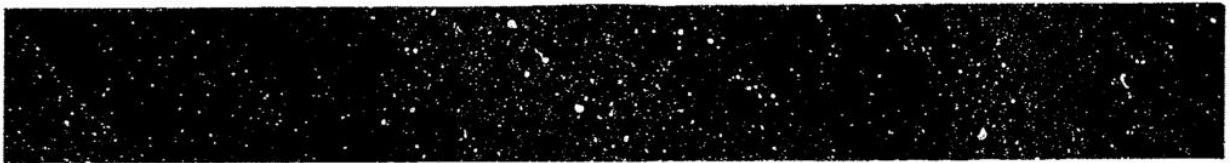
UNH...

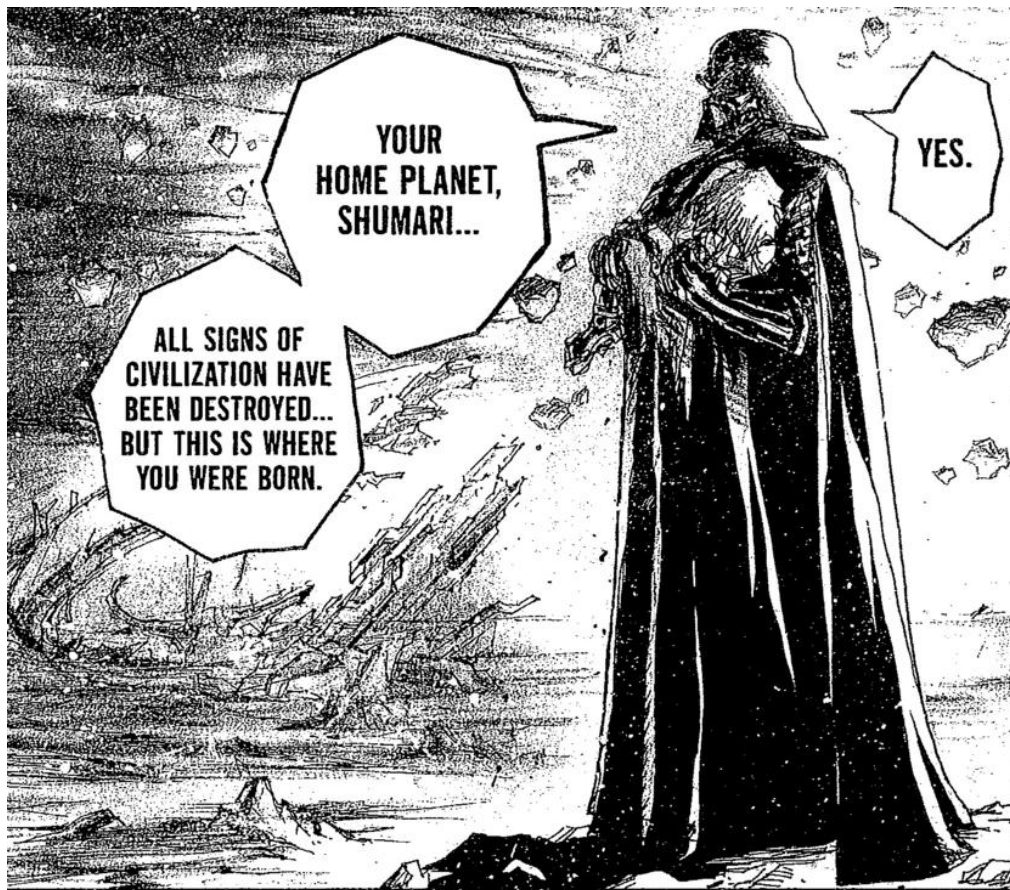


N
O
O
O
O
O
O
O
!!!









YOUR
HOME PLANET,
SHUMARI...

ALL SIGNS OF
CIVILIZATION HAVE
BEEN DESTROYED...
BUT THIS IS WHERE
YOU WERE BORN.

YES.



HUFF...

HUFF...

HUFF...

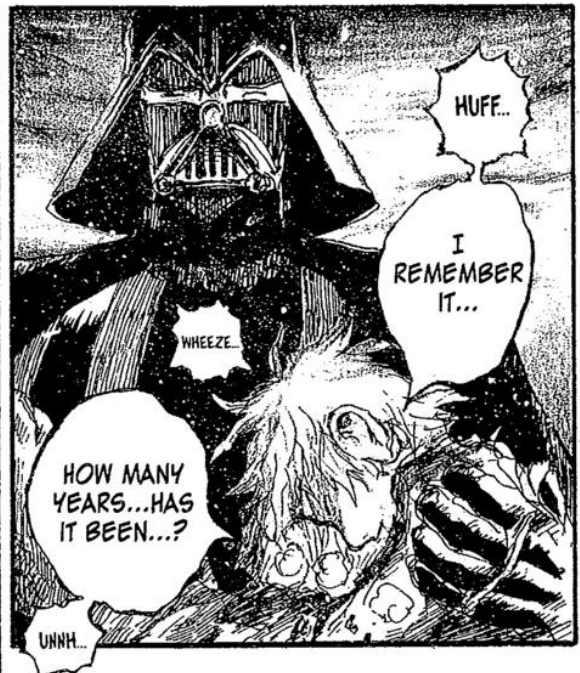
IS THIS...?



TH-
THANK
YOU...
MASTER...

I...

I WAS BORN
HERE...AND
GET TO DIE
HERE...



HUFF...

I
REMEMBER
IT...

WHEEZE

HOW MANY
YEARS...HAS
IT BEEN...?

UNNH...



DON'T
DIE, TAO...

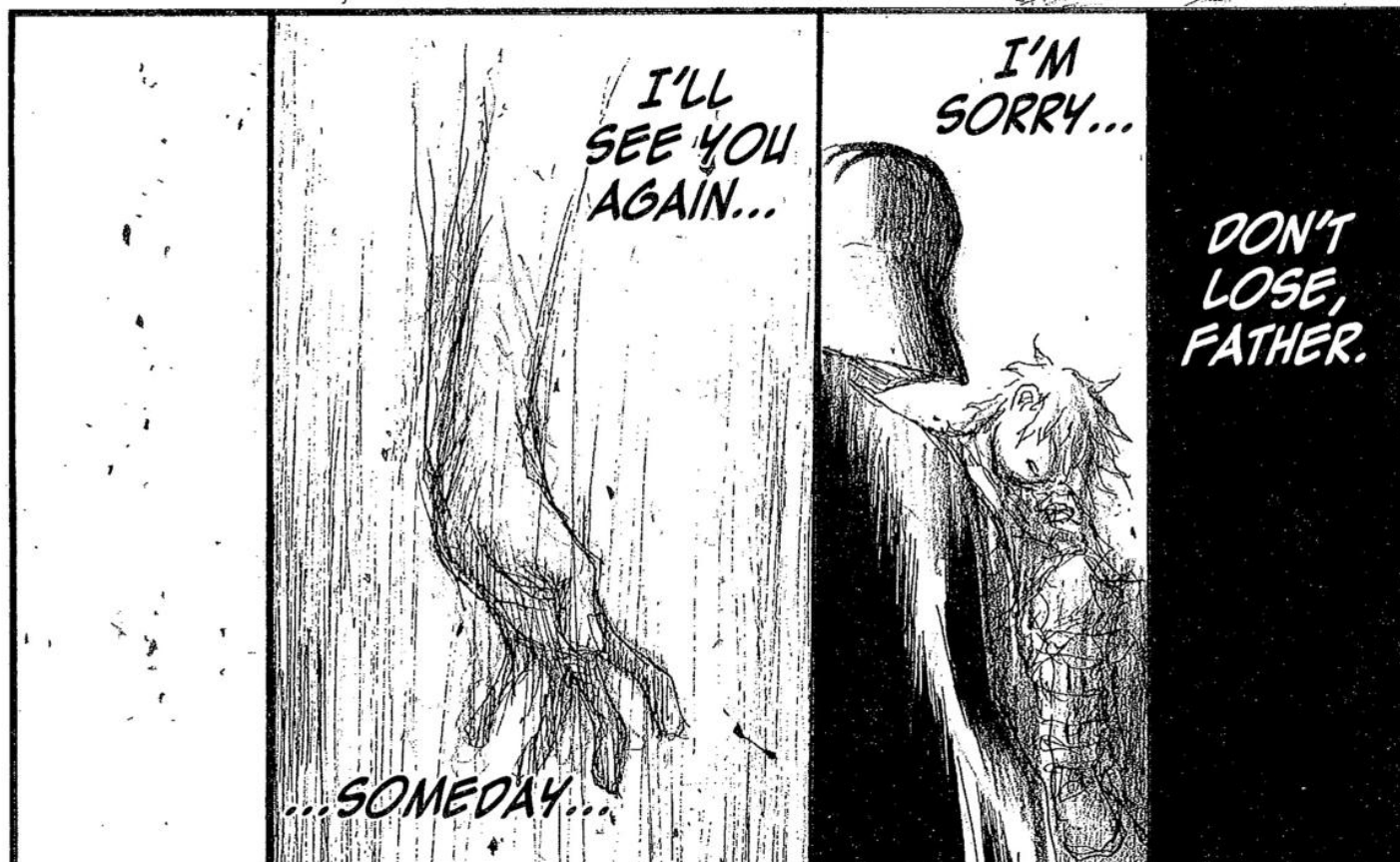
!!

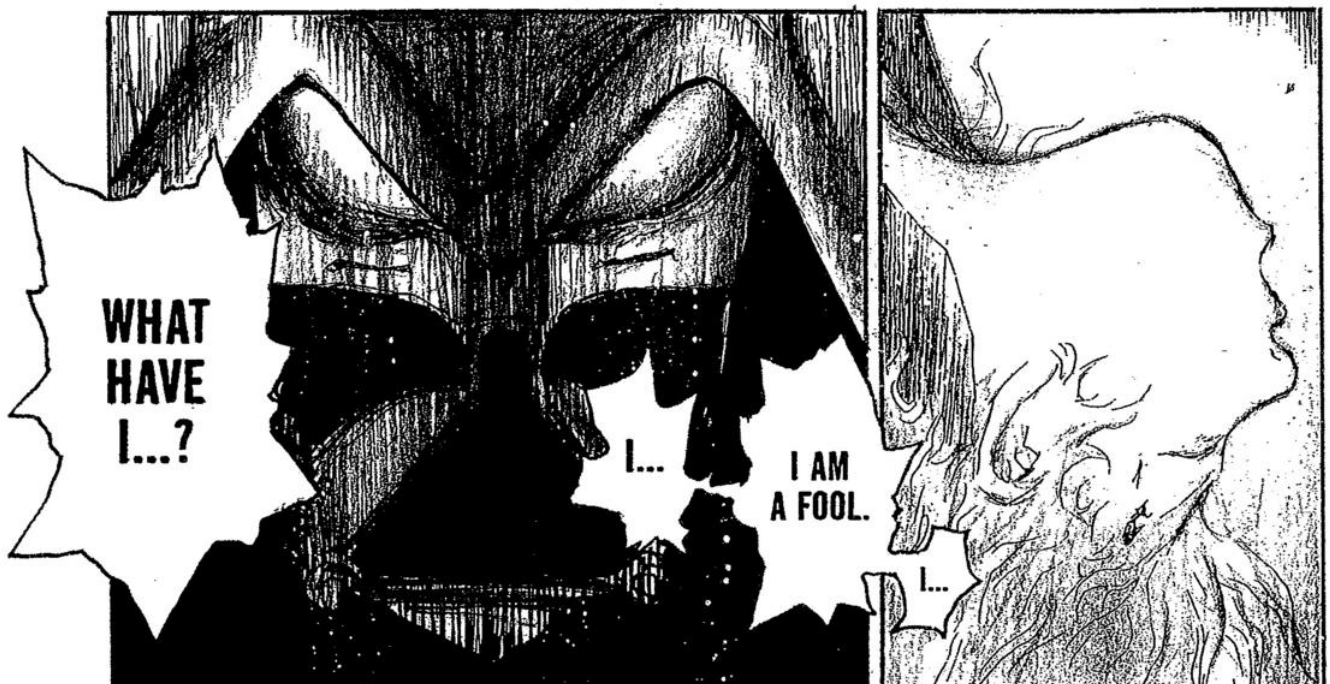
THANK
...

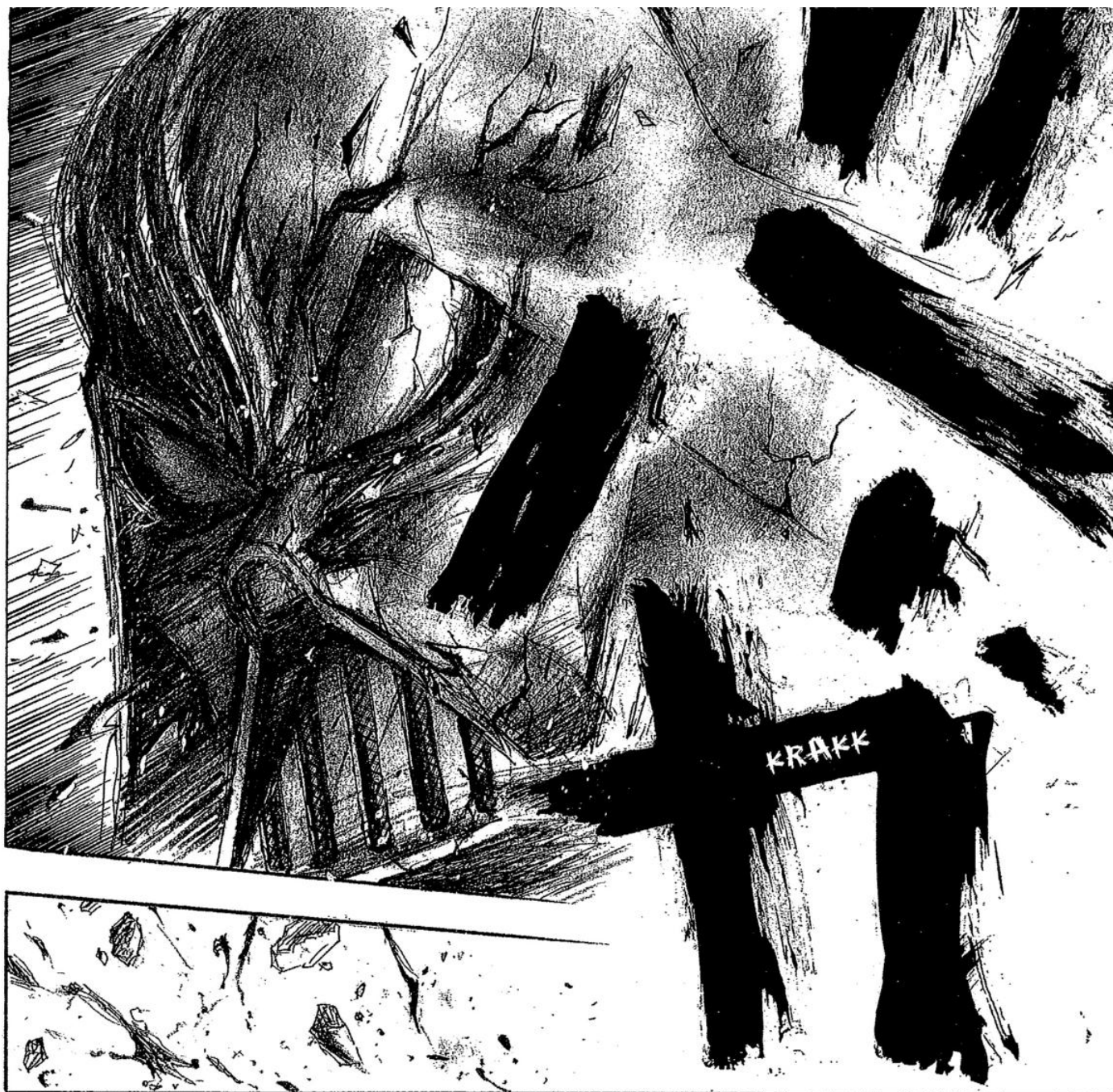
...YOU...



IF YOU
WANT TO
HATE ME...
THEN HATE
ME...









GUHH!



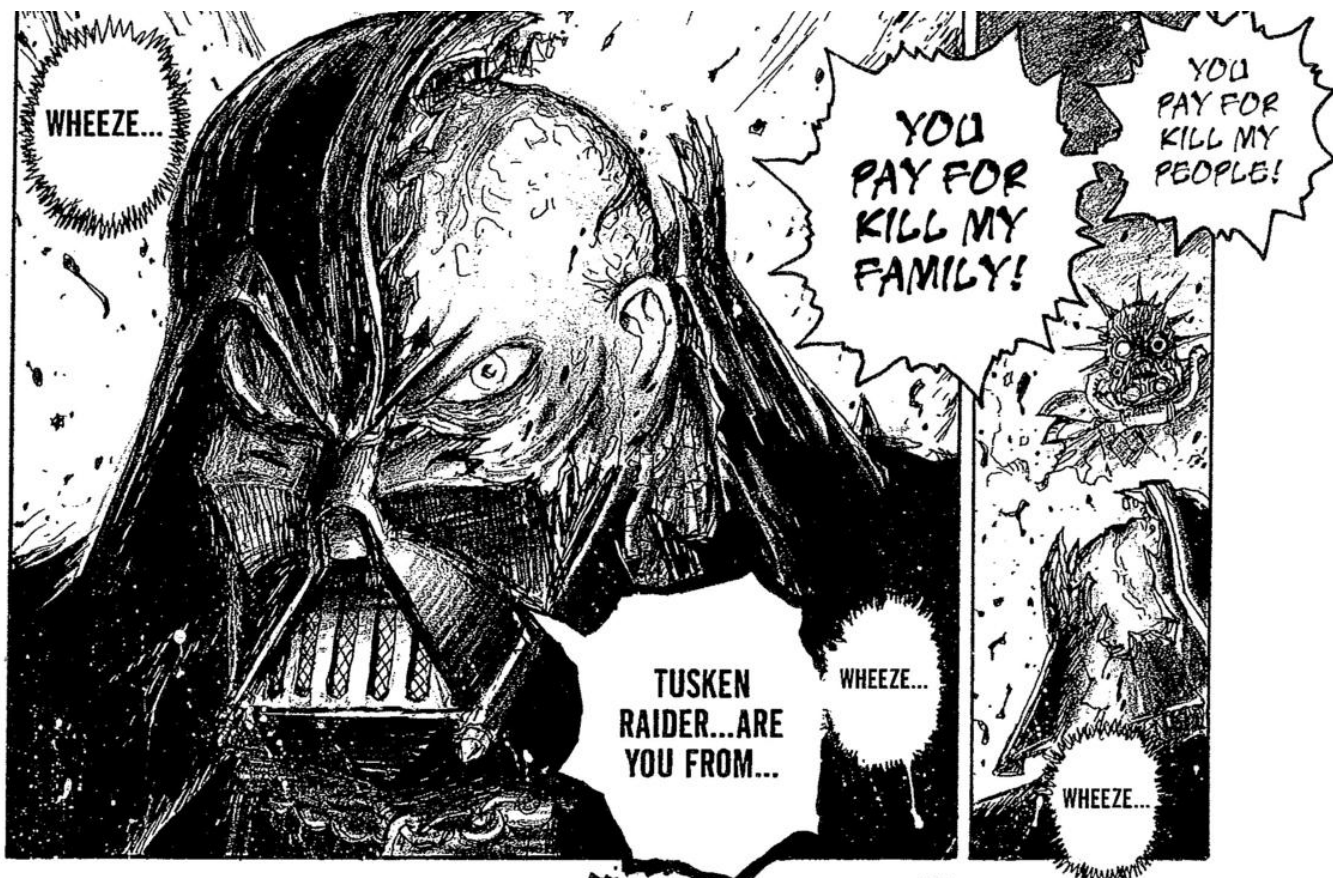
HAFF...

WHEEZE...

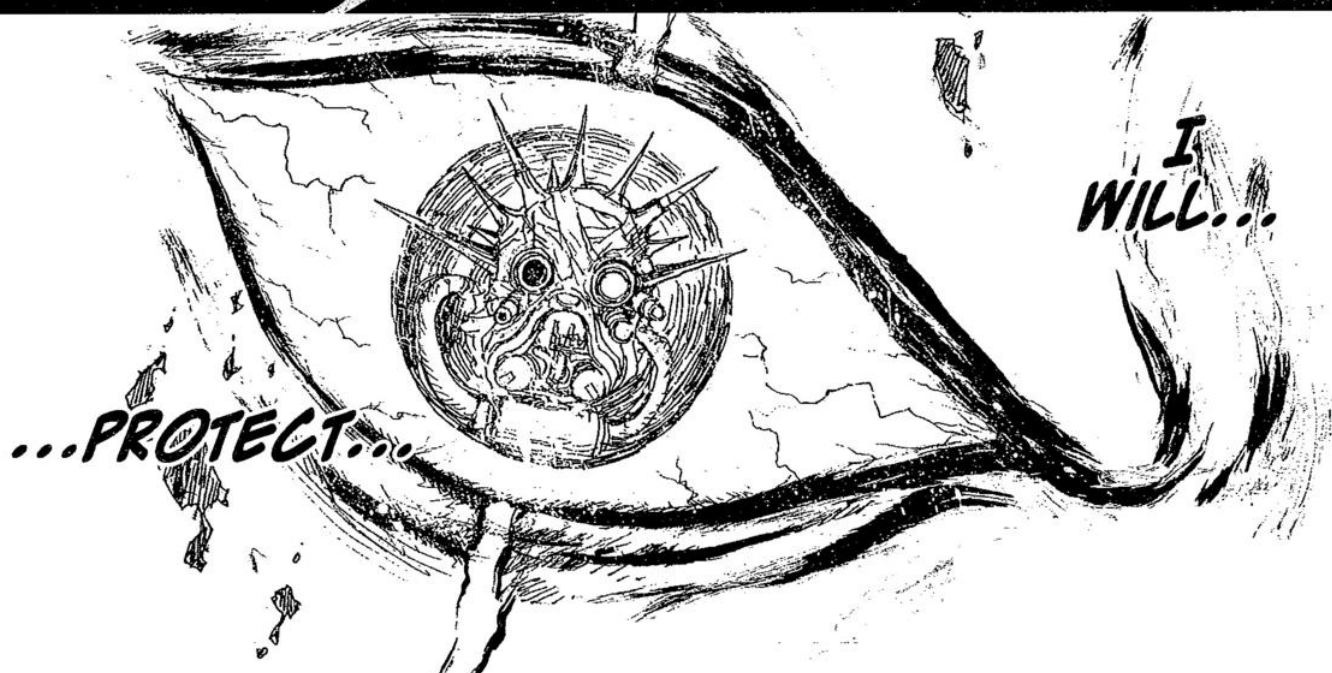
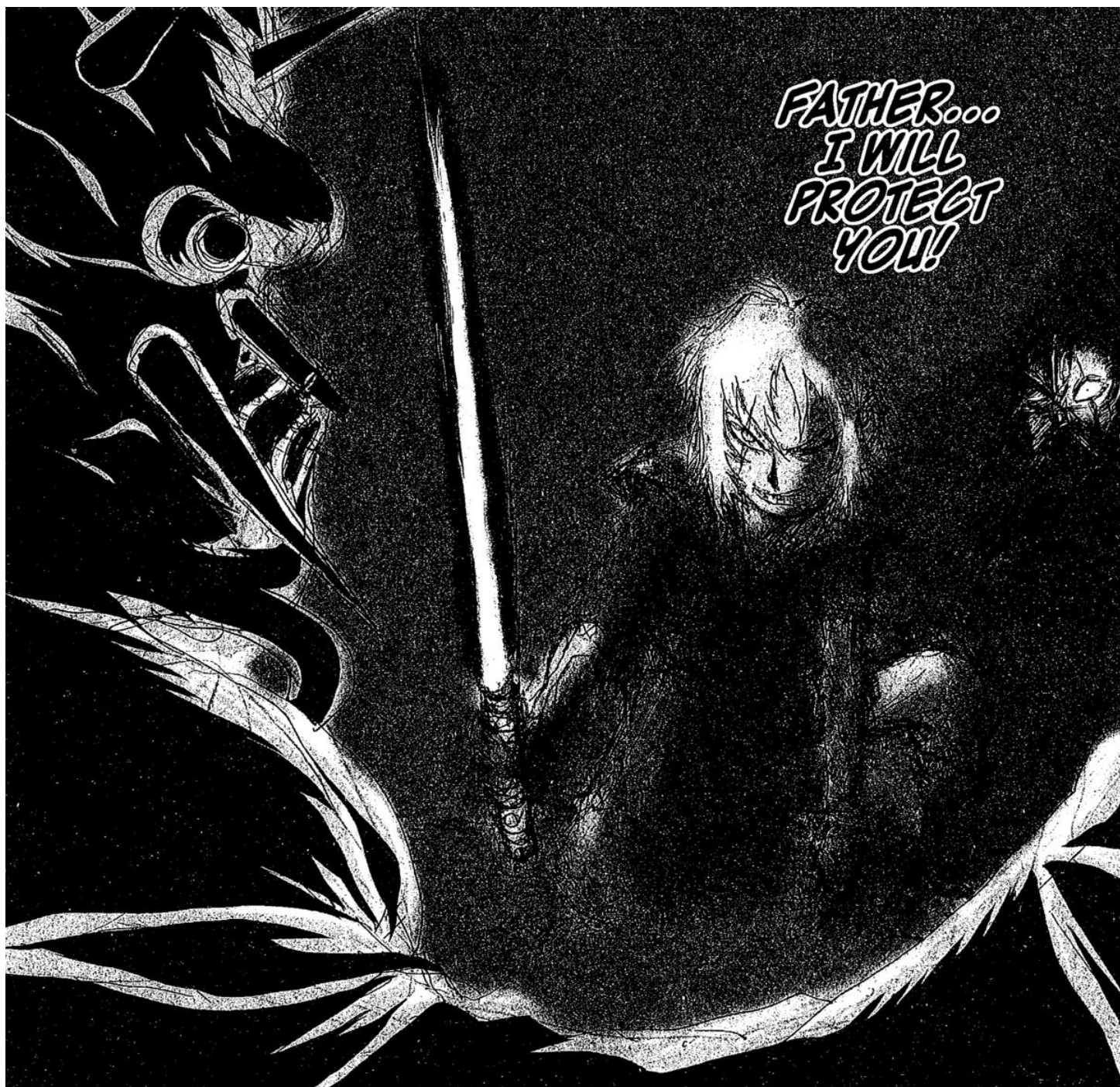
**HUNT END
NOW. YOU
END NOW.**

**SEARCHED
GALAXY
FOR YOU!**

**HUNT YOU
YEAR UPON
YEAR!**

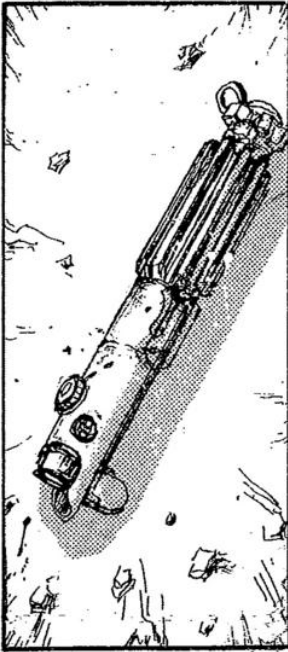
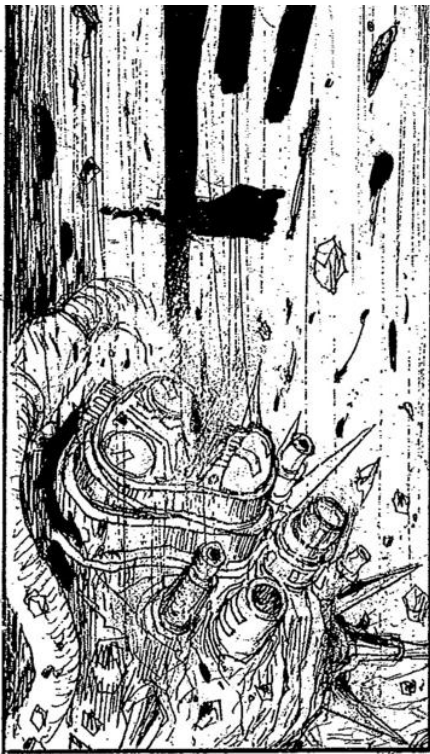


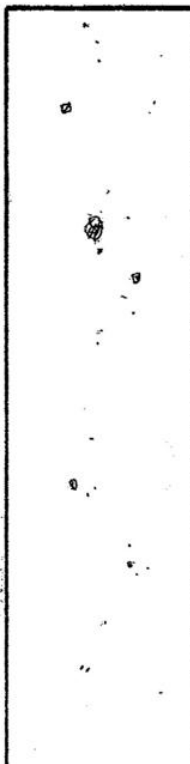


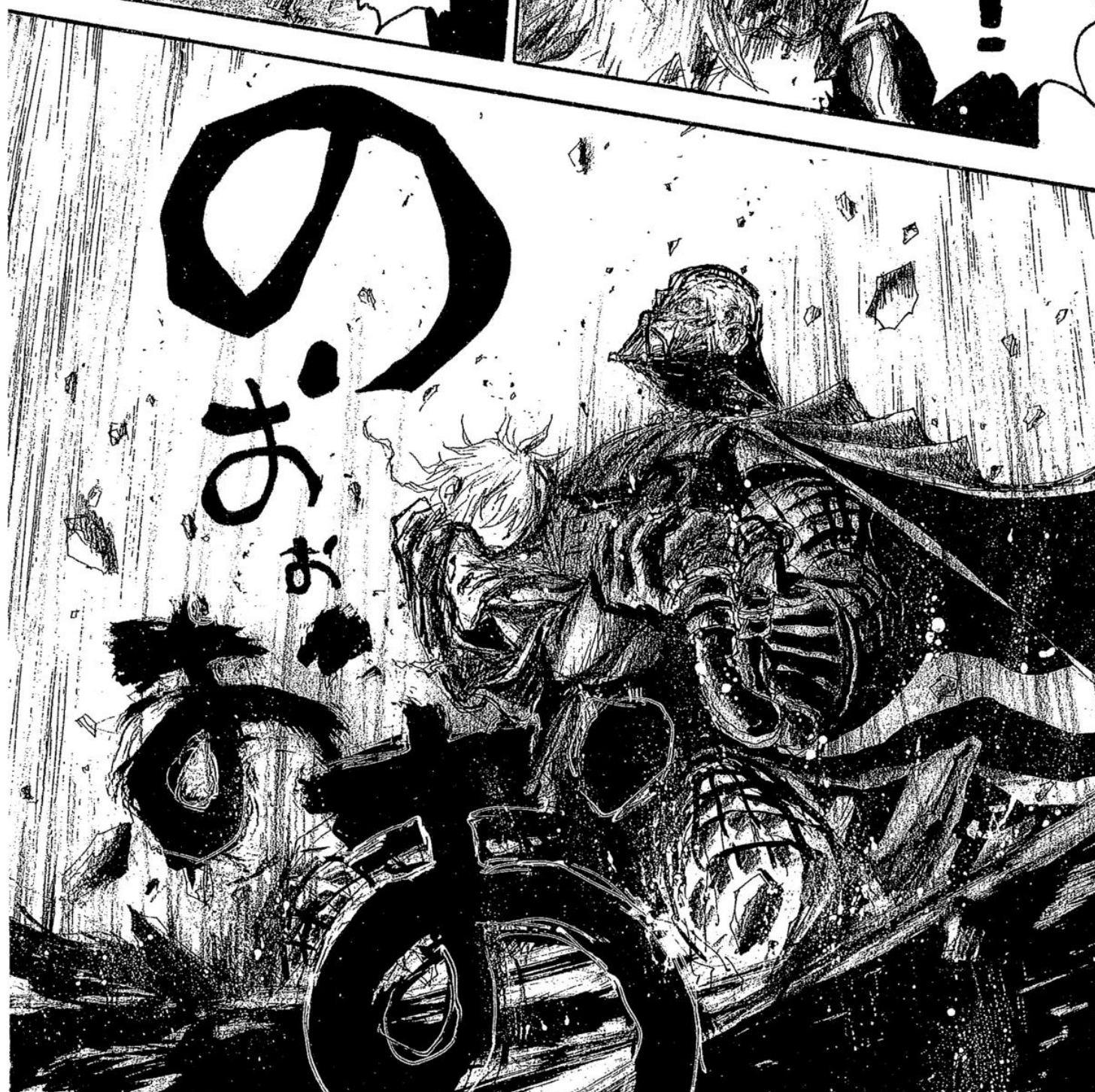


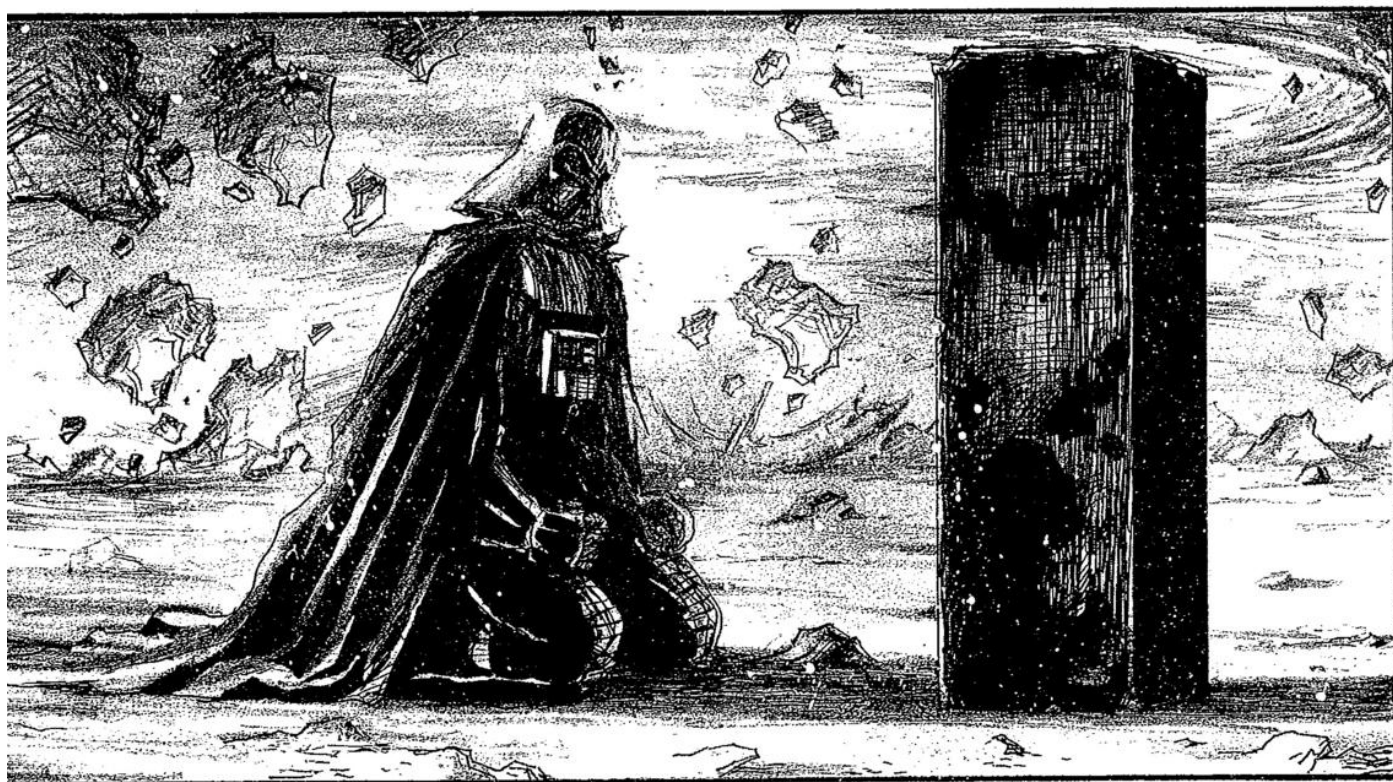
I
WILL...

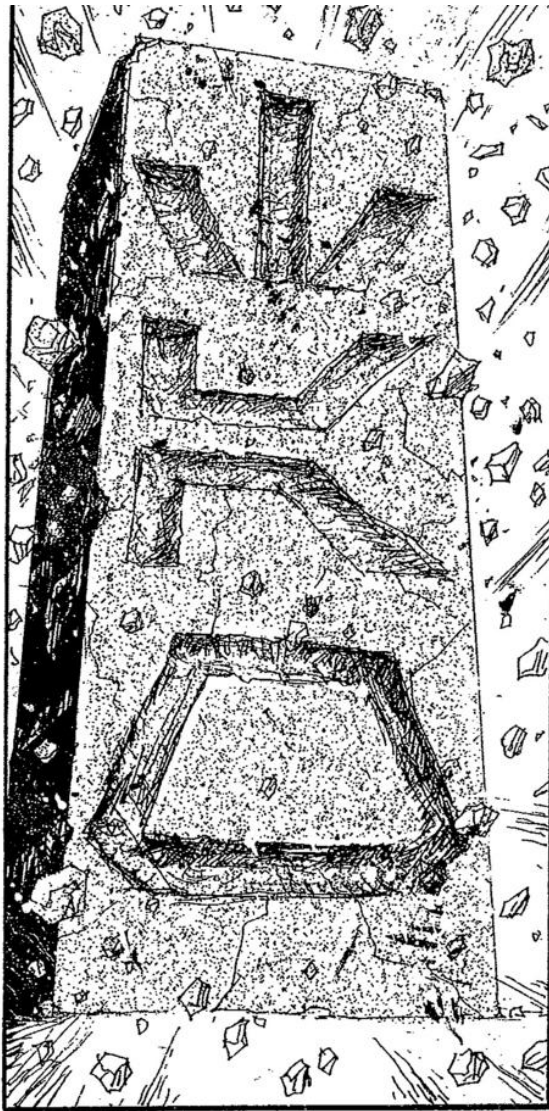


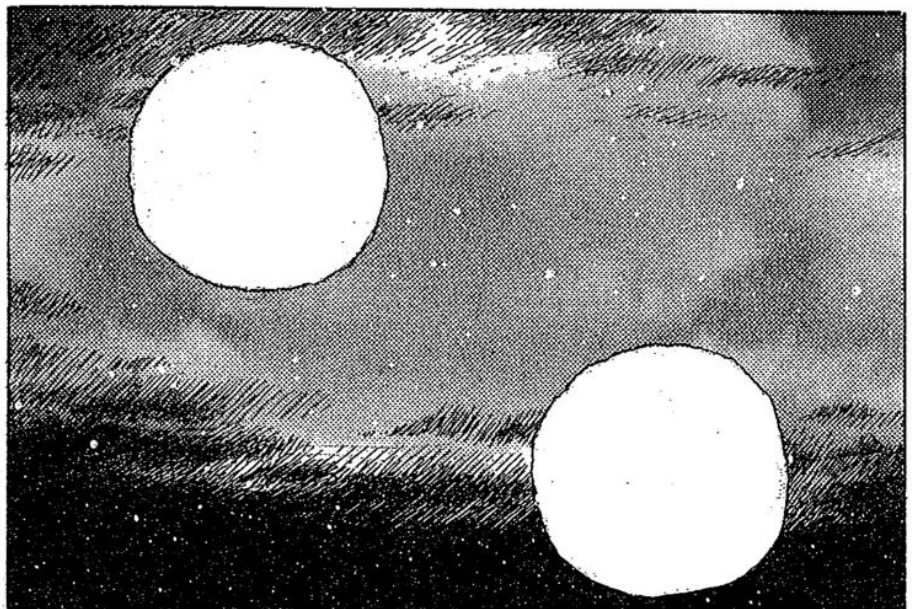
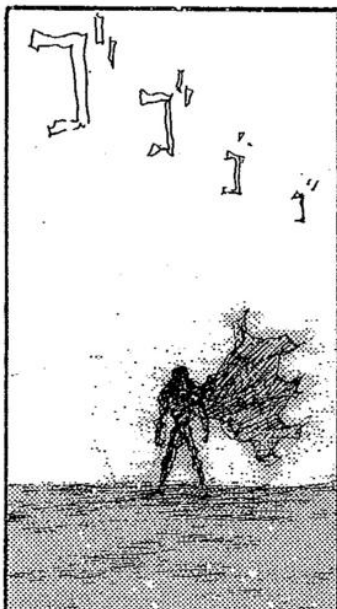
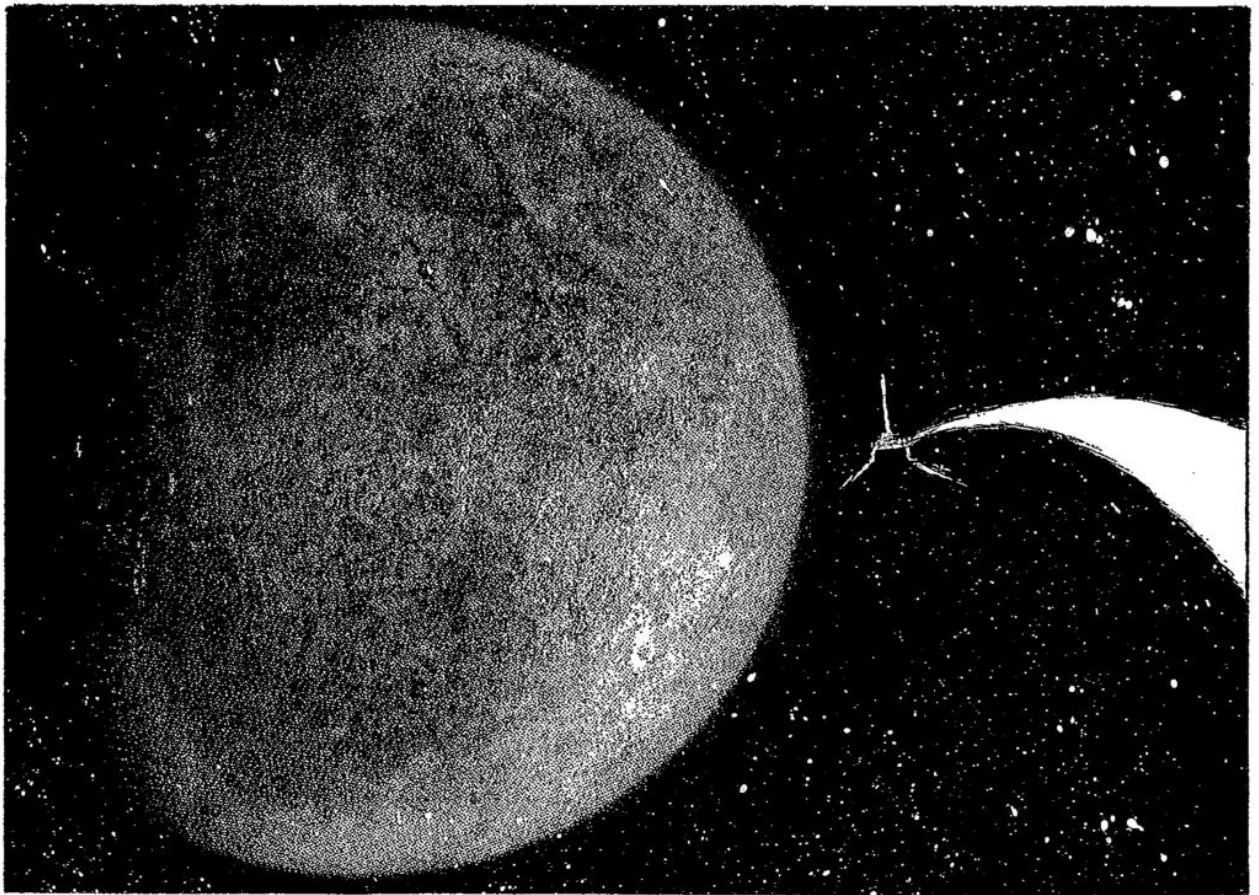
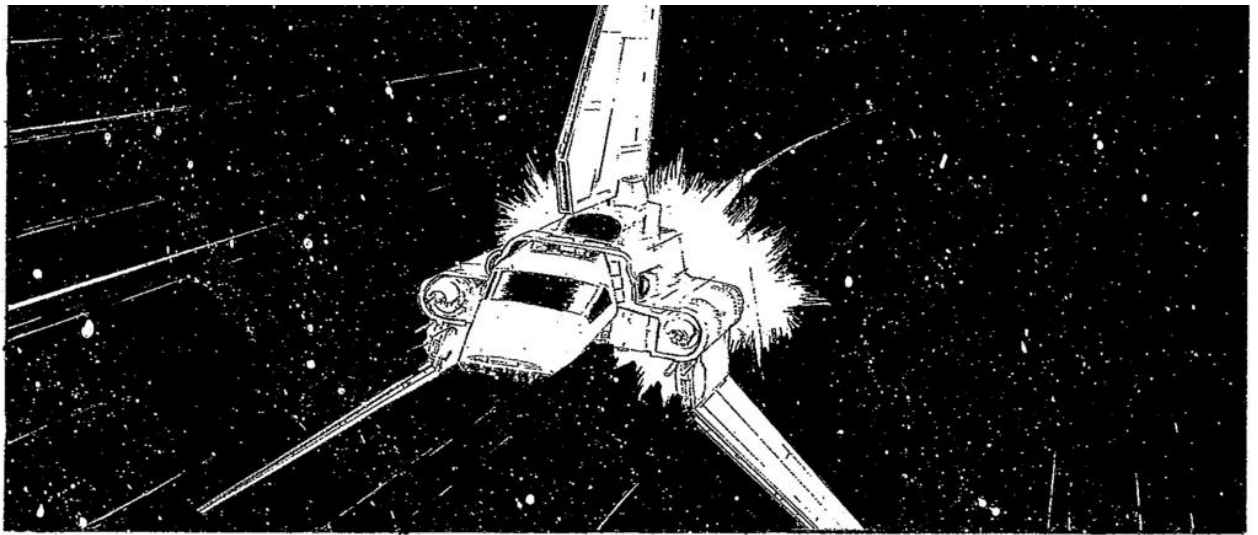




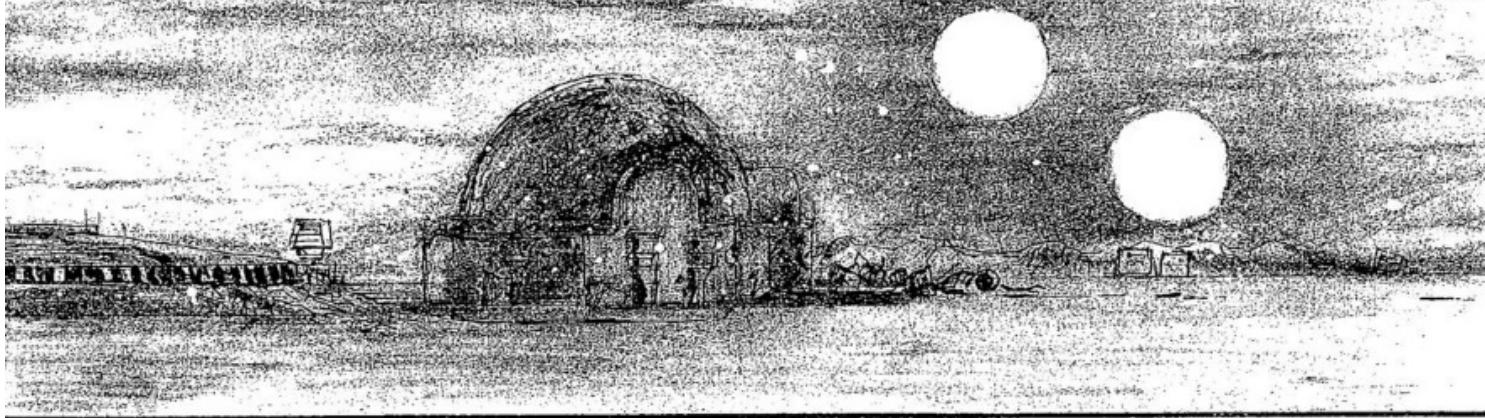




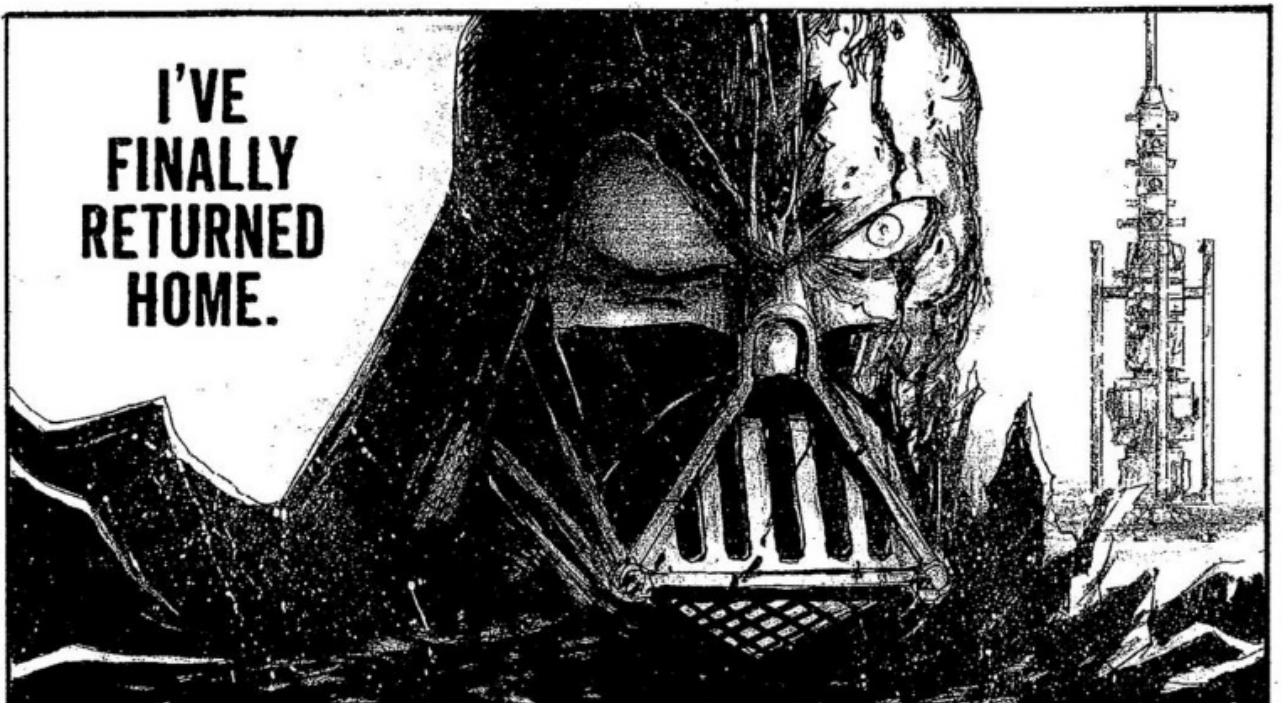


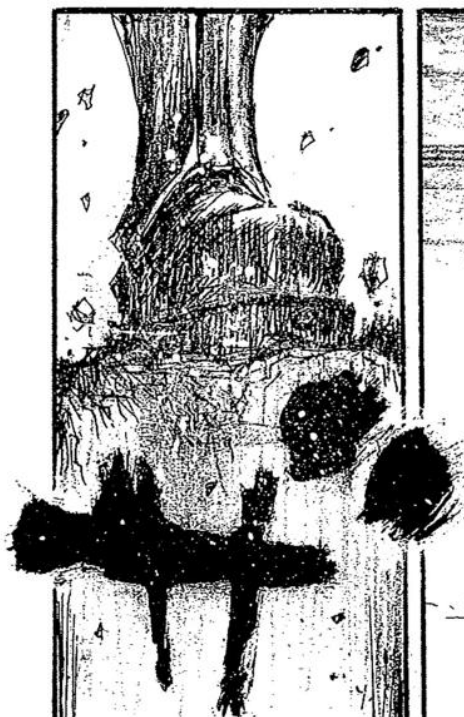


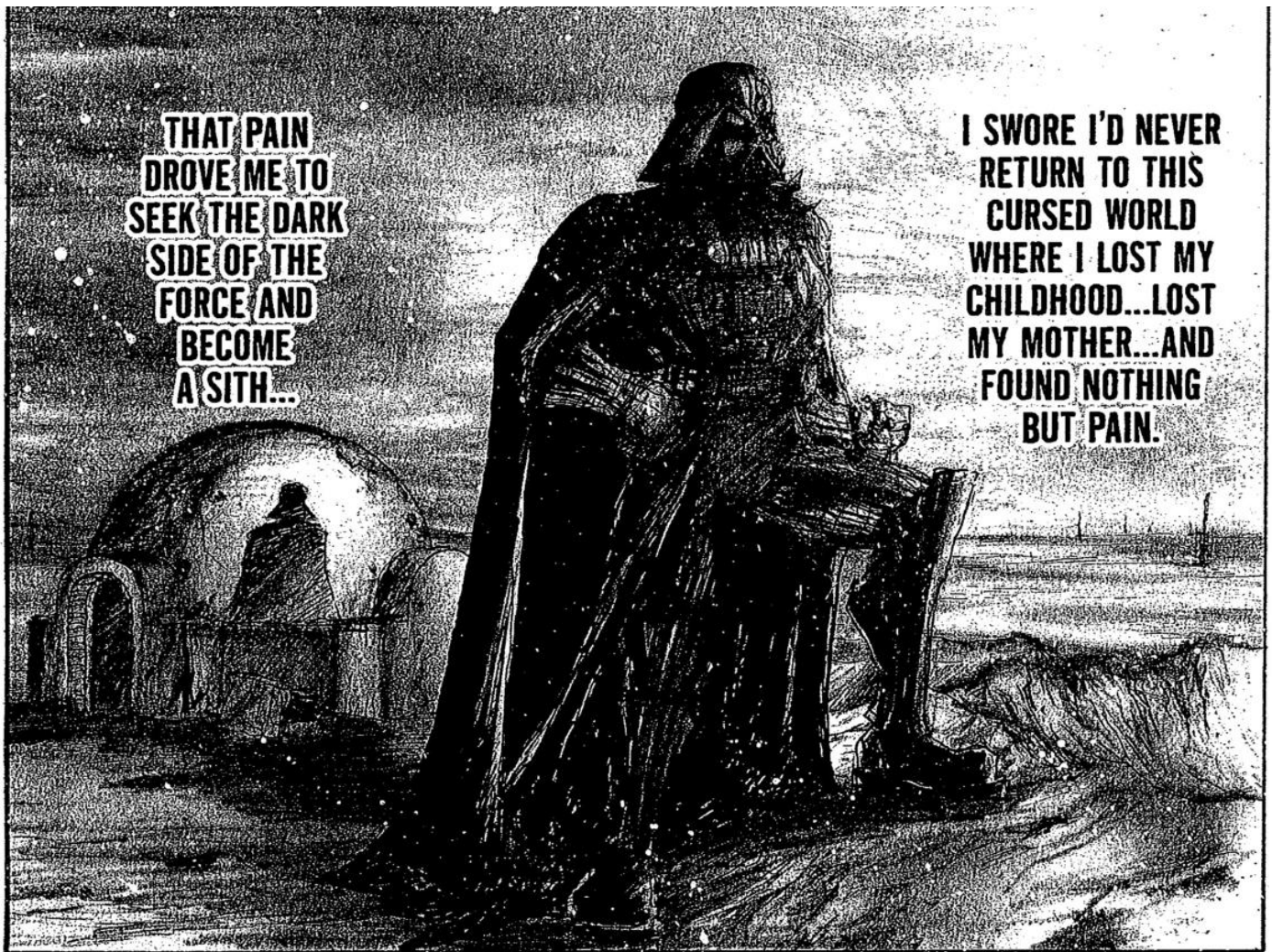
I'VE RETURNED HOME.



**I'VE
FINALLY
RETURNED
HOME.**







THAT PAIN
DROVE ME TO
SEEK THE DARK
SIDE OF THE
FORCE AND
BECOME
A SITH...

I SWORE I'D NEVER
RETURN TO THIS
CURSED WORLD
WHERE I LOST MY
CHILDHOOD...LOST
MY MOTHER...AND
FOUND NOTHING
BUT PAIN.

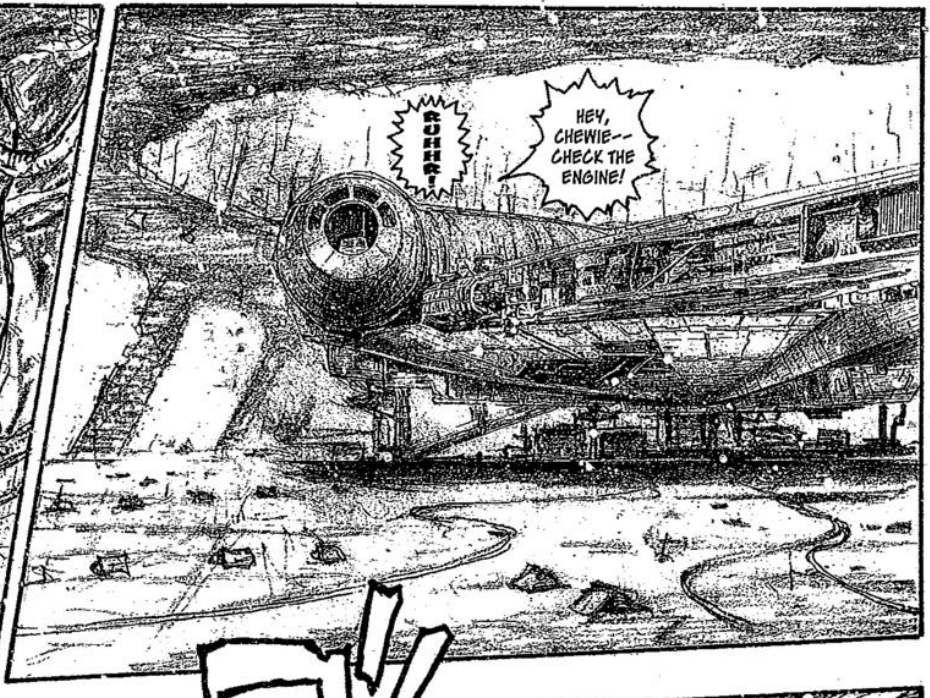
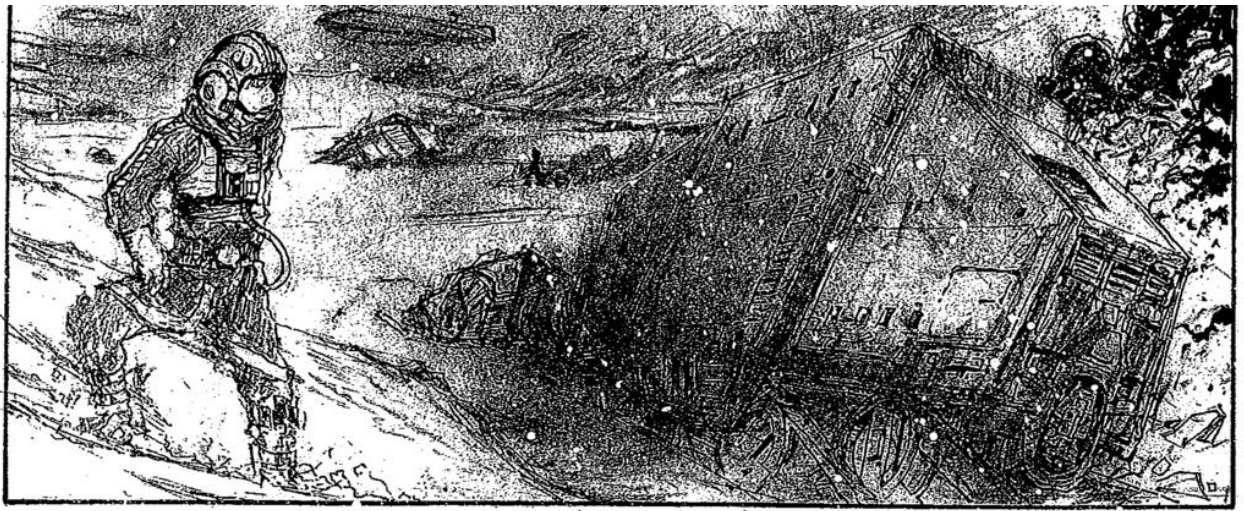


...BUT NOW I
HAVE HOPE.



LUKE
SKYWALKER...
MY SON...

THE
NEW
HOPE!



...AND MY
DESTINED
VENGEANCE
BEGINS
HERE!

I AM
DARTH
VADER...

完全★超悪
PERFECT EVIL
完
3

Hiromoto-SIN-ichi

THE END

Special thanks to
Junzo Takagi (FX Ltd.)

One Step Ahead

Alarms and nearby explosions rang in Han's numbed ears as he double-timed it down the twisting ice corridors. He tugged Leia behind him, grabbing her arm. He knew he was going to hear about this later, but decided to worry about it when they weren't in danger. If that time ever came.

"Wait! Please, wait!" Threepio's pelvic servomotors whined in protest to the pace he was trying to keep. His audio membranes were just as barraged as any human's in Echo Base, but he was able to sort through much of the cacophony with his droid efficiency. He heard them: stormtroopers, behind him.

Threepio turned the corner, coming up to a sealed blast door. Pasted on the door was a yellow and orange hazard label. An ancient part of him, a holdover from one of his earlier daring masters, seemed to take over. Threepio reached out, and tore the label off. He continued his run, faster than before, around another bend trying to find Captain Solo and Mistress Leia.



The stormtroopers charged down the bend in the corridor, their helmet-mounted sensors ready to catch any unsuspecting Rebels.

Their leader, a veteran of the Akuria II garrison, tested on many frigid worlds, led his men to the sealed door. He savored the moment as he punched the controls. It will take more than mere locks to stop an Imperial blizzard. The door slid open, and the troops filed into the chamber with military efficiency.



Vader took a quick glance into the chamber. Huge chunks of its rear wall had been caved in, exposing it to the surface light. Under piles of blood-stained snow were some of his most seasoned, well-trained troops.

"Rebel troops?" the Dark Lord rumbled.

"I don't think so, sir." replied his lieutenant.

ENTRENCHED



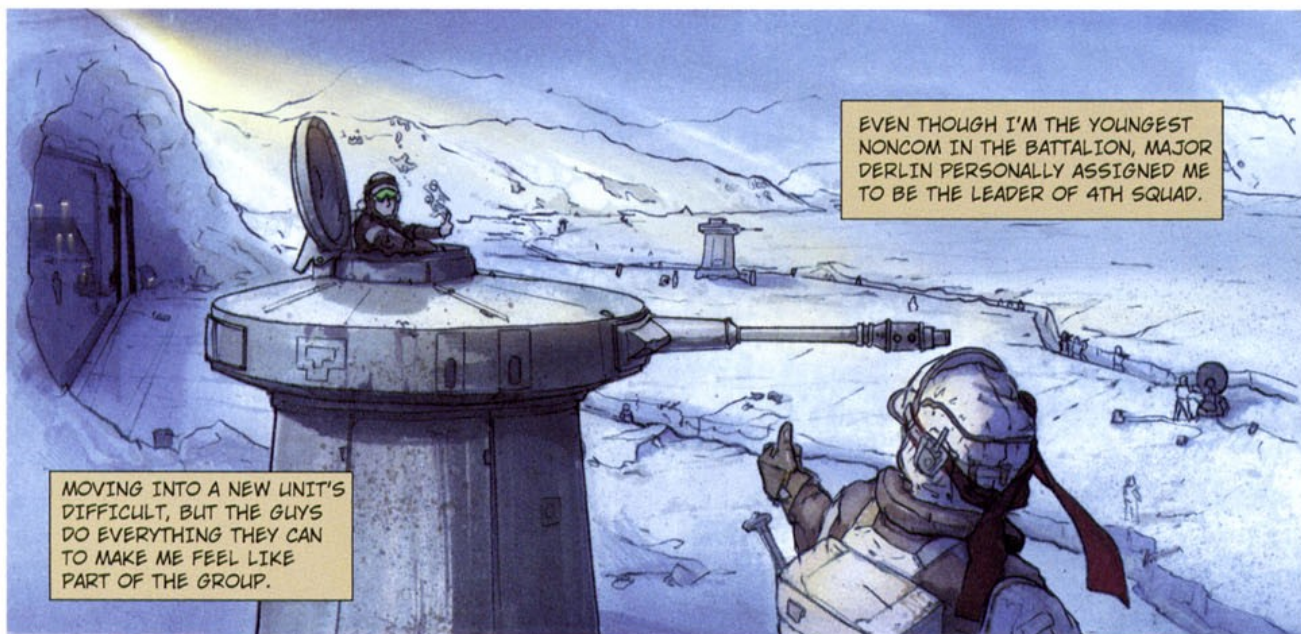
DEAR MOTHER,
FIRST I WANT TO APOLOGIZE FOR
NOT BEING ABLE TO WRITE HOME.
THE REBELLION, AS YOU KNOW, HAS
US ON THE MOVE QUITE A BIT AND
WE'VE BEEN WORKING TOO HARD TO
HAVE ANY "DOWN TIME" FOR
ANYTHING PERSONAL.

ACTUALLY OUR BATTALION COMMANDER
ORDERED US **NOT** TO WRITE. HE'S
AFRAID REMEMBRANCES OF FAMILY
WILL MAKE US HOMESICK, TAKING OUR
MINDS OFF THE TASKS AHEAD--

--BUT WITH THE PRESSURES OF WHAT I
FEEL, WHAT *I KNOW* IS ABOUT TO COME...

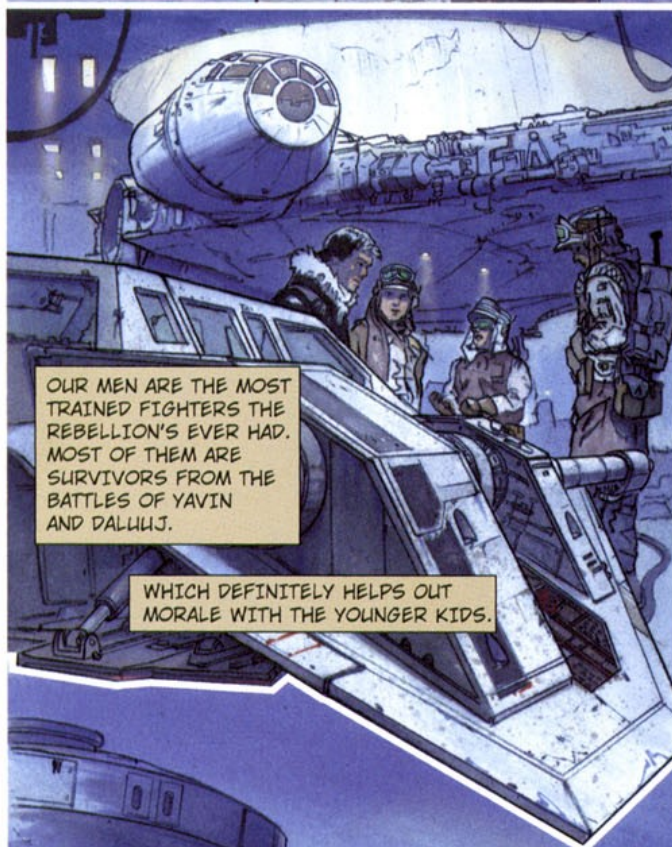


...I DIDN'T THINK I SHOULD WAIT ANY LONGER.



EVEN THOUGH I'M THE YOUNGEST NONCOM IN THE BATTALION, MAJOR DERLIN PERSONALLY ASSIGNED ME TO BE THE LEADER OF 4TH SQUAD.

MOVING INTO A NEW UNIT'S DIFFICULT, BUT THE GUYS DO EVERYTHING THEY CAN TO MAKE ME FEEL LIKE PART OF THE GROUP.



OUR MEN ARE THE MOST TRAINED FIGHTERS THE REBELLION'S EVER HAD. MOST OF THEM ARE SURVIVORS FROM THE BATTLES OF YAVIN AND DALHUIJ.

WHICH DEFINITELY HELPS OUT MORALE WITH THE YOUNGER KIDS.



THOUGH MOST OF THEM TALK TOUGH, I CAN TELL THEY'RE ALL STILL AFRAID...

...AFRAID OF THE UNKNOWN...

...AFRAID OF THE FUTURE...

...AFRAID OF DYING.



UNFORTUNATELY I CAN'T SAY WHERE WE ARE, BUT I CAN TELL YOU THAT IT'S COLD.

IT'S SO COLD THAT THE SPEEDERS WON'T FLY HERE WITHOUT MODIFICATIONS--

--SO THEY'VE TRAINED THE LONG-RANGE SCOUTS TO RIDE ONE OF THE LOCAL ANIMALS FOR RECON PATROLS!

MY MEN AND I SPENT LONG, ARDUOUS HOURS SETTING UP THE PERIMETER DEFENSES, DOING WHAT WE COULD IN CASE WE WERE EVER FOUND HERE.

THEN THIS MORNING, CAPTAIN SOLO MADE SCRAP OUT OF AN IMPERIAL PROBE DROID THAT SLIPPED PAST OUR PROXIMITY SENSORS...

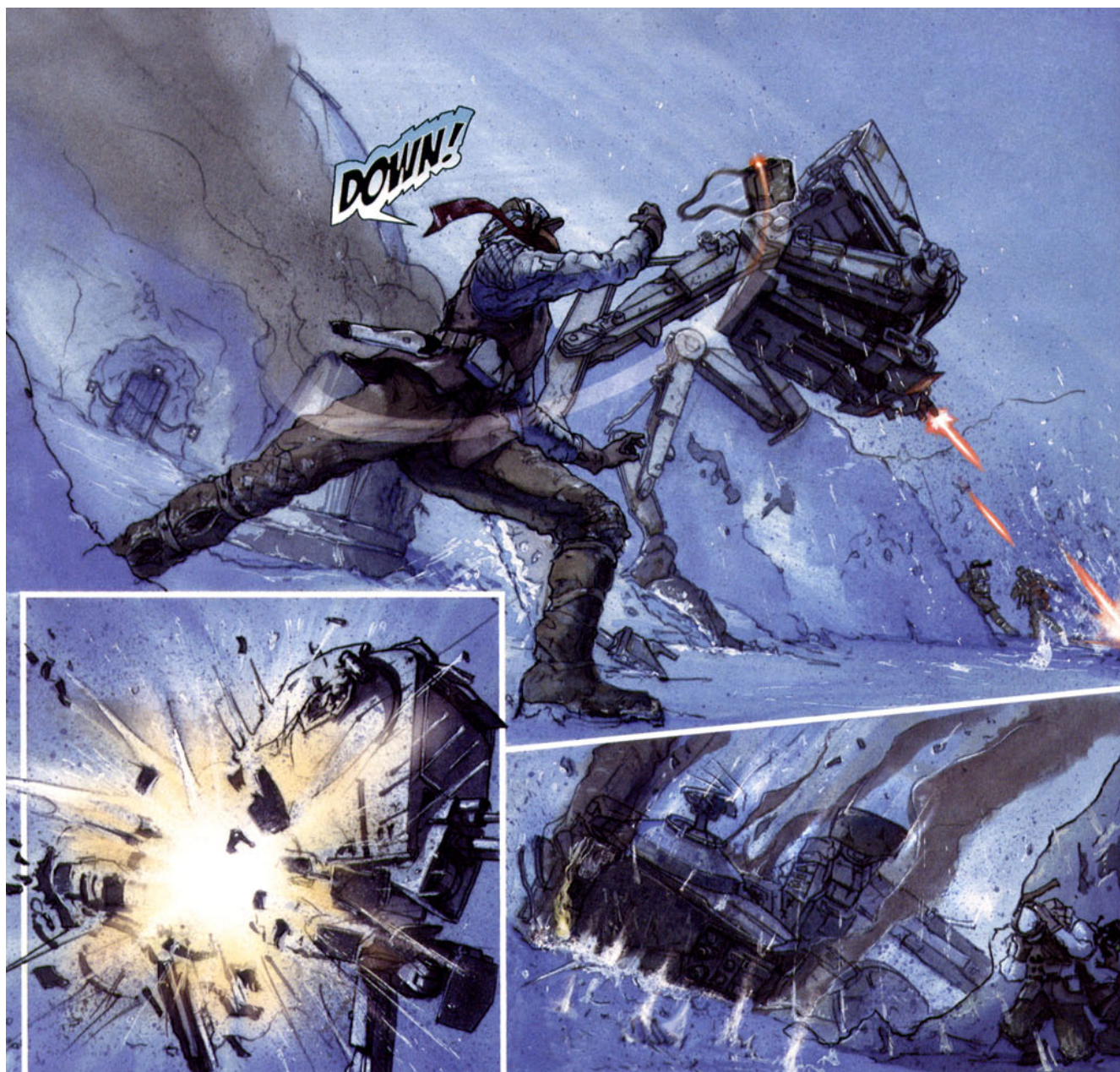
...WE KNEW THEY'D BE COMING--



--AND WE WERE READY FOR THEM.









THEY'RE CANNON FODDER OUT THERE!

FIRE!



FUNNY THING IS,
MY BIGGEST SENSE
OF DREAD DOESN'T
CIRCLE AROUND MY
PHYSICAL DEATH--



--BUT AROUND THE
DEATH OF MY SOUL.

I WANT SO BADLY
TO BE THE SAME
MAN I WAS WHEN
I LEFT YOU AND
THE OTHERS--



--BUT I FEAR WITH WHAT I'VE SEEN...

WITH WHAT I'LL DO...



IMPERIAL
TROOPS HAVE
ENTERED THE
BASE!

IMPERIAL
TROOPS HAVE--

WUNNGH!



FIRE!

YOU HAVE TO DO UNSPEAKABLE
THINGS TO SURVIVE.



YOU HAVE TO BECOME HARD, UNFEELING.

IT'S KILL OR BE KILLED.



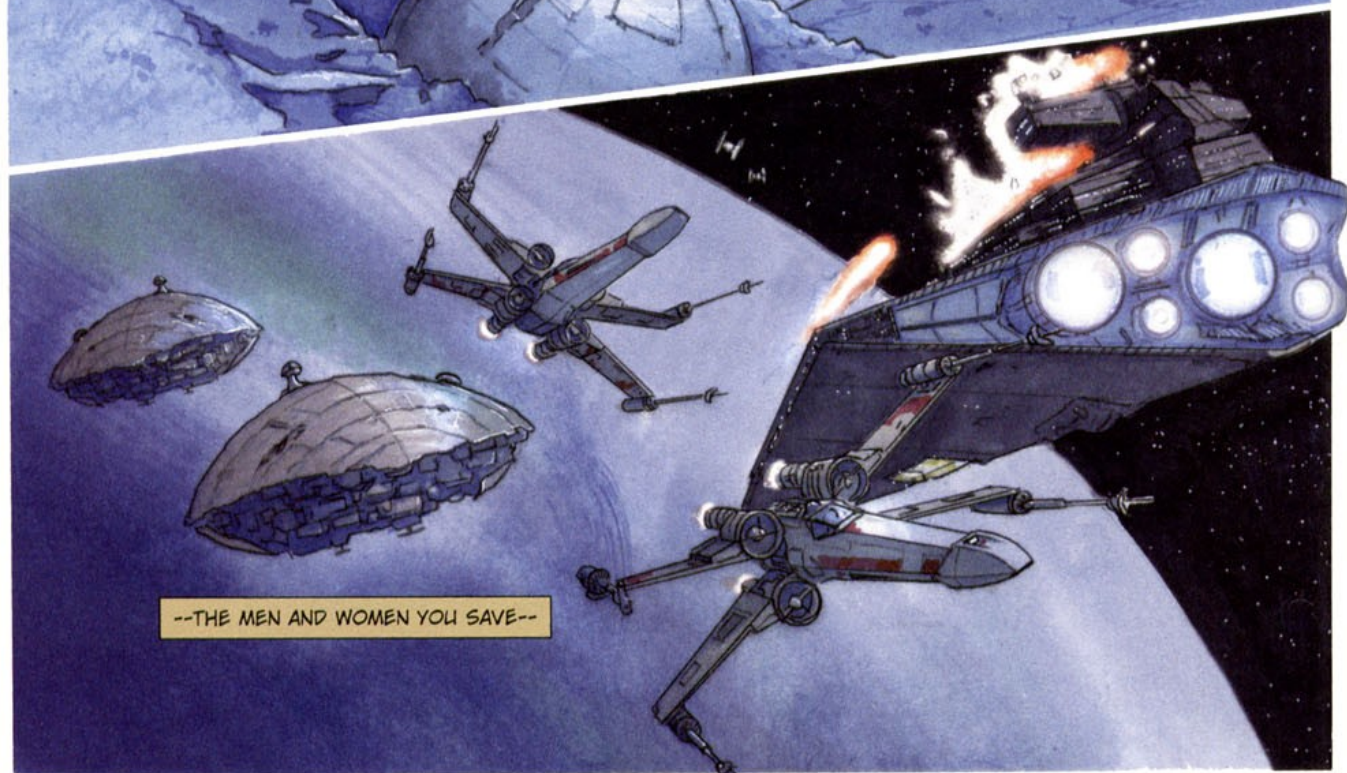
AND IN A SPLIT SECOND, YOU'RE A DIFFERENT PERSON.



DEEP!

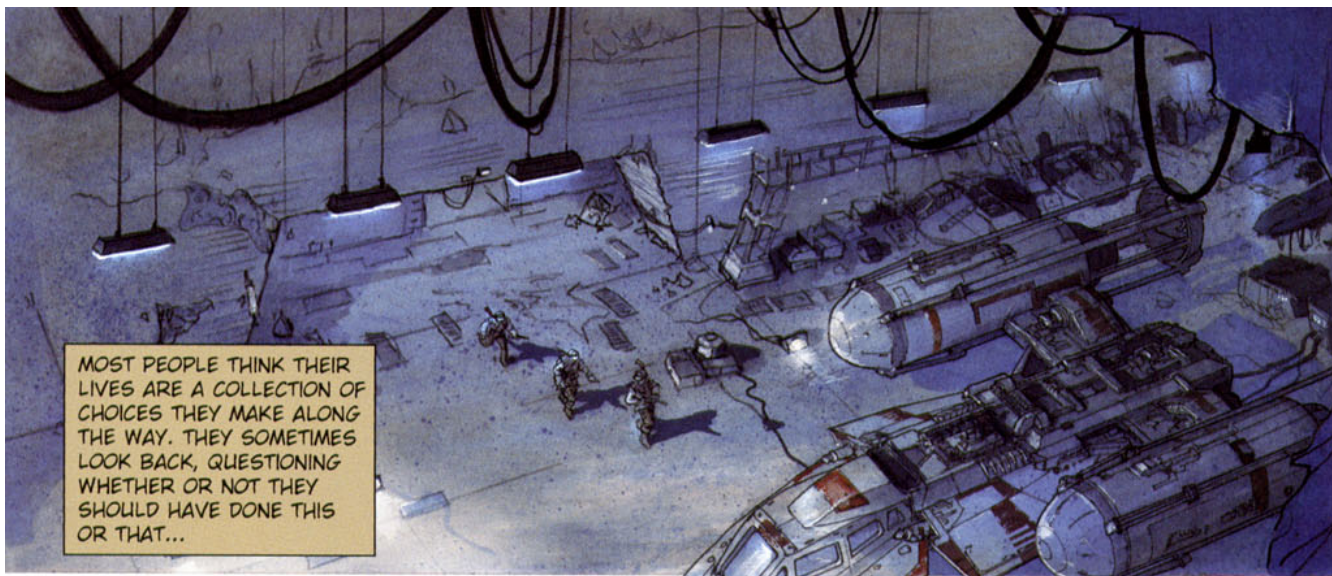


BUT YOU CONCENTRATE ON THE GOOD
YOU'RE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH--



--THE MEN AND WOMEN YOU SAVE--





MOST PEOPLE THINK THEIR LIVES ARE A COLLECTION OF CHOICES THEY MAKE ALONG THE WAY. THEY SOMETIMES LOOK BACK, QUESTIONING WHETHER OR NOT THEY SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS OR THAT...



GHAAHUUFF!



NOOOO!!!



GET BACK!
GET OUT OF
HERE!

WE
WON'T LEAVE
YOU BEHIND!



GIVE...
GIVE THIS TO
MY MOTHER!





Running The Gauntlet

The following is an excerpt from the personal memoirs of Wedge Antilles, used by permission of the author.

The pain in my right arm was throbbing as I pulled the nose of my X-wing up and away from Hoth. Janson and I were forced to ditch our snowspeeder after taking a hit and losing our starboard stabilizer, but luckily neither of us were seriously hurt. The pain in my arm disagreed with the previous statement, but at least it was nothing Too-Onebee wouldn't be able to patch up later.

I caught a glimpse of Janson sitting in the gunner's position of the V-wing that dipped into view on my right. He winked at me with what appeared to be forced optimism, as Hobbie pulled the V-wing into formation with my starfighter. We were among the last to liftoff, but it was reassuring to know that two such able men were flying on my wing. The dire straits of our circumstances abruptly clicked into my awareness as the commander of the transport that we were escorting checked in over the comlink. I confirmed his escape vector and ran a fast blanket scan. Naturally, my worst fears were confirmed. An Imperial Star Destroyer sat directly in our escape lane! Having seen what was left of the ion cannon earlier, I knew we had no hope of surface-to-space cover fire. We were on our own.

"Two fighters against a Star Destroyer," just as Hobbie had said at the briefing. I smiled at the thought of how Luke might have reacted to Hobbie's comment had the commander been to that particular briefing. He probably would have said something about Beggar's Canyon and his old T-16.

The laser flack began to fly thick and heavy as the flat, wedge shape of the giant Imperial ship grew steadily larger. We needed a plan, something radical, something that would surprise those predictable, Imperial, computer-controlled guns. I knew just the thing.

"Transport Commander, this is Leader One. Adjust to course 2-7-5," I transmitted. The ship's captain probably wondered what I was up to, but he apparently knew me well enough not to question the order.

Hobbie had no such reservations, however, and he buzzed in over the comlink. "What's the idea, boss? Why do you want him hangin' back like that?"

Confidently, I replied, "Trust me." But I could hear the trepidation in his voice.

"Okay. It's your show, but I hope you know what you're doing." So did I.

There was a rapid-fire barrage of "What do you think your doing?" and "Are you out of your mind?" from Hobbie when I pulled in directly behind his V-wing, my nose cone barely two meters from his cylindrical nacelles.

"Just hold her steady and sit tight," was my less-than-effective attempt to calm him down. I knew he would catch on once he stopped to think about it, and I was right, although he still sounded more than a little disturbed by the idea.

"A Tallon split? But that's just a hot-shot training maneuver. It's never been done in actual combat." I didn't bother to reply, so he did it for me. "I know, I know, there's a first time for everything. Let's just hope we live to brag about it."

The Tallon split was a simple maneuver in theory, but in practice it was difficult and dangerous, requiring split-second timing and uncanny reflexes as we flew so close together that the computer-controlled batteries on the Star Destroyer would read us as one vessel. Then, when we got close enough, I would dart out from behind Hobbie, cutting at a 45 degree angle beneath him. In theory, it would take the automated batteries on the Star Destroyer a full five seconds to lock on me. And five seconds was all I would need to Nerf's-eye one of the giant vessel's sensor globes and give the transport enough time to slip neatly into hyperspace. This was all theory, of course.

I wished to the Force that my arm would stop throbbing as I readied myself for the maneuver. I just had to put it out of my head, like Luke did with the Death Star. The thought of that miraculous shot reassured me. I may have even smiled as I remembered it. Then, an all-too-close blaster cannon bolt flashed by, and I knew I couldn't wait any longer. It was now or never, or maybe both. With a quick throttle movement, I cut out from behind Hobbie. A quick laser burst, and the globe disintegrated before me.

As I passed overhead I could hear Hobbie's triumphant cry over the comlink, "Yeah! Transport Away!"

As I entered hyperspace I thought I heard a familiar voice say, "Good shooting, Wedge," but it didn't sound like Hobbie. In fact, it didn't seem to come from over the comlink at all. As I think about it now, it sort of sounded like ... Luke.

The Price of Victory

Light Side Campaign: Scenario 3: Clash in the Void

Aboard the Mon Calamari cruiser Champion, you have evacuated from Hoth. Your next destination is the designated Rendezvous Point for the Alliance. You stand watch on the bridge as the ship prepares for the jump to lightspeed. Suddenly, alarms blare throughout the starship and the bridge crew members spring into action.

'Incoming starship,' says one scanner operator. 'Star Destroyer,' says another.

'Imperialclass...it's the Tyrant!' says a third. 'She's scrambling TIE fighters,' reports yet another technician.

'This is Captain Lennox of the Imperial Star Destroyer Tyrant,' says a voice over a comlink. 'You have General Crix Madine aboard. Give him to me, and I'll call off my attack.'

'There will be no deals,' says the captain of the Champion as he snaps off the comlink with the Tyrant. 'Launch fighters!' he says to the deck officer. Through the massive windows of the cruiser's bridge, you can see the X-wings and Y-wings of the ship's complement blasting into space.

'We've got to hold off the Tyrant long enough to make the jump to lightspeed,' says the captain. He turns to you and says, 'Get into a fighter and get out there!'

'I've had some basic flight training,' you say.

'Get into an X-wing! We need all the help we can get,' says the captain. 'Just stick by your wingman and you'll be fine.'

A few minutes later, you're strapped into a snubfighter and flying into a space battle.

You're lucky enough to survive the space battle and even get your X-wing back aboard the Champion safely. 'They tell me you're not an experienced snub pilot,' says General Madine, who greets you in the docking bay. 'You have impressed me today. Join me in the Officer's Lounge when you're free.'

After your post-flight debrief, you make your way to the lounge. Wedge and Madine are both there already. 'Your callsign was Vapebait, I don't know if you knew that,' says Wedge with a laugh. 'But you came through with flying colors. Your wingman says you earned an assist on one of the TIE kills.' Good job!

From the data-journal of Voren Na'al

Occupying the outermost orbit in the Hoth system is a chaotic asteroid belt, the result of two rocky planets colliding eons ago. The impact shattered both worlds, scattering a wide storm of asteroids throughout the system. To this day, the remains of the worlds continue to smash into one another, pulverizing each other into so much dust. The fragments that make up the thickest region of the belt vary in size from tiny granules to immense planetoids with trace atmospheres.

Over the years, the Hoth asteroid belt has attracted criminal elements that used the field for effective, if dangerous, hiding places. Aside from the threats of asteroid collision, the belt features natural inhabitants that spacers need to be wary of. The Hoth asteroid belt is filled with mynocks, silicon-based energy parasites that often attach themselves to passing starships.

The Hoth asteroid belt is reputed to have one of the largest space slugs on record. While I generally dismissed this as spacer talk, the kind of tales told in cantinas throughout the galaxy, when the *Falcon* rejoined the Alliance fleet I learned otherwise. The first surprise came when I learned that Captain Solo kept logs. The second surprise was that the sensor logs indicated that the *Falcon* spent some time in an immense space slug. The logs scaled it at about 900 meters. It's definitely one for the scientists.

As incredible as this find was, it also supports another unlikely theory. Spacer legend has it that a pirate named Clabburn used space slugs as guardbeasts for his roving asteroid headquarters. While this was years ago, other legends say that these slugs grew to incredible size in the zero-gravity of the asteroid field. It's interesting that while the *Falcon* was making history in the Galactic Civil War, it was also shedding light on some old spacer folklore.

To: Captain Amm Natejeka, *Treasure Trove*
From: General Carlist Rieekan, Alliance High
Command
Re: Blaster gas procurement.

Amm, I would have requested this in person if not for the evacuation. This is your mission that you must complete immediately. Head to the coordinates enclosed on this datapad, under file v22358. There, you are to establish contact with the black market of this mining colony, and acquire a cargo of spin-sealed tibanna gas. A landing permit is also enclosed. The second set of coordinates are for our rendezvous point, which you must make within five days. You know the supply problems we are facing. Our fleet needs that gas. We have every faith in you.

May the Force be with you.

General Rieekan.



The dim lighting of the frigate's command room creates long shadows on General Rieekan's already worried face.

"Still no word?" he says, after a lengthy silence.

"None, sir," replies Major Derlin, staring intently at a glowing tactical map. In it, slowly turning like an impossible aquarium, a holographic representation of the amassed Rebel fleet was delineated in bright green. "The *Treasure Trove* has missed its rendezvous mark by 36 standard hours."

Rieekan steps around the console, slowly pacing. "And our supply status."

"We barely have enough blaster gas to supply the ships present," says Derlin, "that's not even counting the ships yet to check in."

"All right," says Rieekan, looking Derlin straight in the eye. "We better send out the *Out Runner*."

Hoth Transit

From the data-journal of Voren Na'al

It's when I think about how Han Solo evaded an Imperial fleet that I miss him the most, and realize what a remarkable man the Alliance has lost. The following report was collected research for an address to be read by Mon Mothma, recognizing Solo for his contributions. When Princess Leia discovered what I was doing, she was angrier than I had ever seen her. She didn't agree with the air of finality that it carried.

Immediately after its departure from Hoth, Captain Solo plunged the *Falcon* into Hoth's asteroid belt. It was pursued by the Star Destroyer *Avenger*, one of the few remaining fleet ships in the area. Much of the fleet was dispersing, attempting to intercept whichever transport they could. Solo and Chewbacca's skills were such that not a single pursuing TIE fighter survived the initial pursuit. If only their repair skills could be so commended, since the *Falcon*'s hyperdrive failed to activate. The *Falcon* set down in a massive crater in an equally massive asteroid. In what eventually turned out to be an incredibly huge space slug (see addendum files v153.562), the beleaguered

crew tried to effect repairs to the hyperdrive.

The *Falcon*'s respite was brief, as the space slug did not appreciate stowaways in its silicon esophagus. The freighter tore out of the asteroid belt, exposing itself to the *Avenger* again. The Destroyer was in close pursuit, and the hyperdrive refused to let Solo have a daring escape. Then, and I didn't believe this until I rechecked the sensor logs, Solo attacked the *Avenger*. At last minute, he reverse-triggered the *Falcon*'s acceleration compensators, killing all forward velocity. He pulled the ship close to the *Avenger*, found a blind spot, killed all onboard systems save emergency power, and used the ship's landing claw to secure purchase on the *Avenger*'s conning tower. Such a maneuver, of course, completely destroyed the *Falcon*'s hyperdrive, but Captain Solo didn't have much choice.

When the fleet began to break apart, and the *Avenger* began releasing a second load of garbage, Solo had his timing worked out perfectly. He detached from the *Avenger*, floating away with the rest of the garbage. It was ingenious. It should have worked. If only Fett wasn't so ingenious as well.

by
PABLO HIDALGO

posted at
<http://blogs.starwars.com/pablog/29>

In surfing around the net, I found an old email that I sent to the *Star Wars* Roleplaying Game ListServer in 1998. It had to do with the seemingly implausible trip the *Falcon* has to undertake in *Empire*, from Hoth to Anoat to Bespin at sublight speeds.

In 1996, as a freelancer I wrote the second edition update to *Galaxy Guide 3: The Empire Strikes Back* for West End Games. I tried to take the opportunity to explore and clarify some mysteries about Episode V. I tried to present a possible explanation for the flight of the *Falcon*, but it ended up being edited a bit by the time it saw publication.



I shared my original unedited passage with the listserver, complete with my rationale notes and explanations that I originally sent to WEG and Lucasfilm. I thought you might be interested in reading it...

IMPORTANT: Please do not misconstrue this theory as accepted canon. It was written in 1995 by an outside author and never accepted into published continuity, so it should be taken as speculation only. I'm presenting it here because it might be of interest to readers.

----- Original Message -----

From: "Pablo Hidalgo"
To:
Sent: Friday, April 10, 1998 10:25 AM
Subject: Falcon's Trip From Anoat to Bespin (LONG!)

Somebody Somewhere Sometime Wrote This:

>> Now remember in ESB Han & Leia were going over their choices of which inhabited systems they
>> could go to without hyperdrive. Now their consumables were 2 months & so make some
calculations.
>> Our closest star is 30 light years away. So I guess they can go beyond the speed of light while not
>> going into hyperspace?

The whole transit to Anoat is something I tried to address in *Galaxy Guide 3: The Empire Strikes Back, Second Edition* (1996). In a sidebar entitled Hoth Transit (p. 45) I plainly stated what the *Falcon* did, however, either Lucasfilm or WEG edited the sidebar so it is decidedly more vague. Here is a copy of the sidebar as it appears in my original manuscript.

((Start NEW text box))

HOTH TRANSIT

>From the data-journal of Voren Na'al.

It's when I think about how Han Solo evaded an Imperial fleet that I miss him the most, and realize what a remarkable man the Alliance has lost. The following report was collected research for an address to be read by Mon Mothma, recognizing Solo for his contributions. (1) When Princess Leia discovered what I was doing, I never saw her get so angry. She didn't agree with the air of finality that it carried. In retrospect, I don't understand how I could have been so blind.

Immediately after its departure from Hoth, Captain Solo set course 2-7-1, plunging the *Falcon* into Hoth's asteroid belt. (2) It was pursued by the Star Destroyer *Avenger*, one of the few remaining fleet ships in the area. Much of the fleet was dispersing, attempting to intercept whichever transport they could. Solo and Chewbacca's skills were such that not a single pursuing TIE fighter survived the initial pursuit. If only their repair skills could be so commended, since the *Falcon's* hyperdrive failed to activate. The *Falcon* set down in a massive crater in an equally massive asteroid. In what eventually turned out to be an incredibly huge space slug (see addendum files v153.562), (1) the beleaguered crew tried to effect repairs to the hyperdrive.

The *Falcon's* respite was brief, as the space slug did not appreciate stowaways in its silicon esophagus. The freighter tore out of the asteroid belt, exposing itself to the *Avenger* again. The Destroyer was in close pursuit, and the hyperdrive refused to let Solo have a daring escape. Then, and I didn't believe this until I rechecked the sensor logs, Solo attacked the *Avenger*. At last minute, he reverse-triggered the *Falcon's* acceleration compensators, killing all forward velocity. He pulled the ship close to the *Avenger*, found a blind spot, killed all onboard systems save emergency power, and used the ship's landing claw to secure purchase on the *Avenger's* conning tower. Such a maneuver, of course, completely destroyed the *Falcon's* hyperdrive, (3) but Captain Needa didn't know that.

((Note to editor: Pending Lucasfilm's decision on how the Falcon got to Bespin, the following paragraph may be deleted.))

Solo bided his time, watching and timing carefully as the *Avenger* dumped its garbage in the Hoth system. It rocketed forth into hyperspace, to parts unknown, with an unknown stowaway on its conning tower. A short hour later, it emerged into the nearly empty Anoat system, an apparent rendezvous site for the fleet. Out of one predicament, into another. Chewbacca smiled as he recalled that Threepio had to be shut down he was so hysterical.

When the fleet began to break apart, and the *Avenger* began releasing a second load of garbage, Solo had his timing worked out perfectly. He detached from the *Avenger*, floating away with the rest of the garbage. It was ingenious. It should have worked. If only Fett wasn't so ingenious as well.

((End NEW text box))

ENDNOTES

- 1) New information
- 2) Established in dialogue from *The Empire Strikes Back*
- 3) The ramifications of reverse triggering acceleration compensators established on page 167 of *Heir to the Empire* (hardcover) and page 27 of *Galaxy Guide 5: Return of the Jedi, Second Edition*.
- 4) For more on the continuity involving the *Falcon's* hyperdrive, see enclosed essay.

[[And here's the essay I wrote for Bill Smith and Lucasfilm]]

THE VOYAGE OF THE MILLENNIUM FALCON

Situation

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the *Millennium Falcon* travels from Hoth to Anoat to Bespin without a hyperdrive. Such a voyage would seem to take years at sublight velocities, so there must be a missing element.

Premise

The explanation to be offered in *Galaxy Guide 3: The Empire Strikes Back, Second Edition* is, in part, that the *Falcon* was able to reach the Hoth asteroid belt under its own power. (*The Illustrated Star Wars Universe* states that the asteroid belt is in Hoth, not Anoat as *Movie Trilogy Sourcebook* says.) When it exited the belt, pursued by the Star Destroyer *Avenger*, Solo did his daring maneuver that mounted the *Falcon* on the *Avenger's* conning tower. The *Avenger* then took a brief jump through hyperspace to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in the Anoat system. When the fleet broke up in the Anoat system, the *Falcon* detached, and proceeded, under its own sub-light power, to Bespin. Along the way to Bespin, Solo risked using the *Falcon's* aged and unreliable hyperdrive backup for short "hyperspace skips" to cut down on the time.

Rationale

The above scenarios cuts down the distance the *Falcon* was to have travelled at slow sub-light velocities. A time span estimate from West End Games pegs *The Empire Strikes Back* as being about 8 months long. This allows ample time for Luke's training on Dagobah, and fills out the year interim between Empire and Jedi. Eight months, however, is a very brief period of time in which to travel from one system to another, let alone three.

The scenario is consistent with the asteroid belt being on Hoth. In the film, the *Falcon* entered the asteroid field immediately after leaving the planet. The time spent in the asteroid belt isn't likely to be long. While the ship is in the belt, Luke arrives on Dagobah and begins his training.

After the belt, the *Falcon* emerges and engages the *Avenger*. The *Avenger*, the sole ship left in that area of the Hoth system, leaves after its failed pursuit. Upon Needa's insistence to apologize in person, and under the impression that the *Falcon* was long gone, Needa takes the *Avenger* into hyperspace. (Needa did say he wanted to apologize in person). It heads to where the rest of the fleet has gathered: the nearest system where any Rebel refugees may have departed to, Anoat. The *Avenger* jumps into hyperspace with the *Falcon* attached. When it arrives in Anoat, the *Falcon* detaches, and heads to Bespin.

The remainder of the *Falcon's* trip is its longest stretch, moving from the outskirts of the Anoat system to the Bespin system. According to *Galaxy Guide 2: Yavin and Bespin* (page 41 of First Edition) both worlds lie on the Ison Corridor, with only 2 hours between them in hyperspace. This voyage may have taken months, while Luke continued with his training.

Points to Consider

While the *Falcon* limped its way to Bespin, Fett coolly calculated the only system around it could reach without a hyperdrive. Fett reasoned the *Falcon* had no functioning hyperdrive, since he knew its reputation for hyper-speed, there was no other reason for the *Falcon* to be pursued by Star Destroyers. (This is supported by *Movie Trilogy*) After Fett determined the system to be Bespin, he visited Cloud

City, casing the system. He then contacted Vader, who told him to bide his time. Vader knew his plan to capture Luke was contingent on using his friends as bait, and giving Luke a distinct destination to travel to. Rather than ambush them in deep space, Vader and Fett allowed the *Falcon* to reach Cloud City so that Vader could torture Solo, and lure Luke to Bespin.

The travel time from Hoth to Dagboah has never been revealed, but Luke's trip to Bespin takes 1 day and 3 hours (*Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game, Second Edition* page 112). The *Avenger's* proposed trip from Hoth to Anoat is 1 hour. (*Galaxy Guide 2: Yavin and Bespin*, First Edition, page 41)

If the *Falcon* was attached to the *Avenger* during its proposed hyperspace jump to Anoat, why didn't Solo detach and float away from the Destroyer at that point? He would accomplish little remaining in the Hoth system, since the only marginally-habitable planet was no doubt overrun by Imperials. Furthermore, he had no way of knowing that the fleet had departed. He instead, sat it out, watching as the *Avenger* jettisoned some garbage, and went to the Anoat system. Perhaps this is where Solo got the idea in the first place.

A short time later (1 hour by gazetteer), the *Avenger* emerges in the Anoat system. The crew of the *Falcon* sees a normally empty system full of Star Destroyers. ("Captain Solo, this time you have gone too far!") Solo bides his time again, but doesn't push his luck. As the fleet breaks up, Solo detaches the *Falcon*, and floats free with the garbage.

Anoat seems a plausible rendezvous destination for the Imperial Star Destroyer squadron after the Battle of Hoth. With the last transport gone, the Imperials extended their blockade further out from Hoth. Anoat has the trappings of a Rebel base, as there is "not much there." Kevin J. Anderson established in Jedi Search that the Deyer Colony, on Anoat, was a site of refuge for Kyp Durrone's Rebel sympathetic-parents. (Another question is why didn't the *Falcon* go to Gentes? Oh, well.)

Can a ship attached to another vessel travel with it through hyperspace? Ordinarily, no. Ships with very close masses shouldn't be able to piggyback in hyperspace without serious modification to a ship's hyperdrive. According to *Han Solo's Revenge* (page 114, first complete paragraph. In *The Han Solo Adventures*, it is on page 293, fourth paragraph) a ship generates a drive field when it moves through hyperspace. Anything within that field is safe from the chaotic maelstrom of reality that is hyperspace. The larger a ship is, the larger its drive field. The larger the drive field, the more room to sneak something into the field without adjusting its symmetry. Notice that the area in which the *Falcon* hid is in the shadow of the conning tower's spine. Additional mass shouldn't change a Destroyer's hyperdrive capabilities when the ratio is so stacked in the Destroyer's advantage. If it did, it would mean that a Star Destroyer couldn't make a jump into light speed if it had a ship in its belly-hold, which doesn't make much sense.

This is new: Because *Movie Trilogy Sourcebook* makes a point of mentioning the *Falcon's* hyperdrive backup, then I guess it was used, to some effect, during the trip from Anoat to Bespin. A sidebar in *GG3: Second Edition* will explain just how decrepit and unreliable the *Falcon's* backup is, and how wary its crew was on using it. The reason I'm adamant about a sub-light trip from Anoat to Bespin is because it underscores the desperation of the Rebels' situation, and the line from the *Empire* radio drama: "... Bespin. That's pretty far from here, but I think we can make it on sub-light engines." (pg 203 of Del Rey's *ESB radio drama book*).

* Consumables in another thorn, but I think it can be made to work. After all, the *Falcon* can carry 100 metric tons of cargo, and we don't know for sure it *wasn't* hauling extra consumables. Or maybe the asteroid stone is oxygen rich and they grabbed some for additional consumables. The point is we don't

know they didn't extend their consumable somehow, but we do know the trip is long. Bridging these facts can be left to the reader's imagination.

Man, talk about ancient history!

ph

Update in response to Comments:

*Wow, that was amazing stuff, a much needed explanation!
So the official time to get to Bespin was 8 months?*

No, that's not official, since it was never published. It was an "internal estimate" at best, given as a guide to freelancers, but not meant as canon info.

But you know what's crazy, at one point I developed a scenario that had the Falcon traveling at a significant percentage of the speed of light (C), but not breaking it -- it could not achieve tachyonic velocities without a hyperdrive.

But I was trying to extrapolate what percentage of C could the *Falcon* travel to get from Anoat to Bespin in DAYS yet still have Luke experience 8 MONTHS of time through relativistic time dilation.

I'll have to dig up those numbers, but it ended up being messy, so I never bothered pitching it because the word count required to explain it would have gotten me over my freelance word limit and not have really been that satisfactory an answer.

It required the stars of the Ison Corridor to be within light days or light weeks of one another in order to work, and I wasn't willing to make that kind of leap just yet. At least, not in print.

It's what happens, in my mind, but it is by no means canon.

ph

It's Not My Fault

For all his Academy training, Solo wasn't exactly a man who believed in being prepared. The *Millennium Falcon* is prime example of this, as its recalcitrant hyperdrive system is backed up by an even more stubborn hyperdrive.

About a month after Solo acquired the *Falcon*, he replaced the existing hyperdrive backup with an inferior model to shunt more power into the main sublight and hyperdrives. The hyperdrive backup, an old Republic Sienar Systems model, wasn't even connected to the power cell bank, meaning that to activate it required extensive power rerouting. Furthermore, the hyperdrive backup didn't even have a hard-link to the ship's navicomputer, meaning that all coordinates had to be calculated sepa-

ately, and placed manually into the backup's vector guides.

After Solo's daring maneuver with the Star Destroyer *Avenger*, the reverse-triggering of his acceleration compensator cracked the casing in the main hyperdrive motivator, and caused a severe systems failure in the hyperdrive backup. While the damage was not critical, the *Falcon's* painfully slow backup hyperdrive could only operate for several hours.

Solo risked it, for short hyperspace skips from Anoat to Bespin, but a great deal of the trip was done at sublight speed. With such slow, straight-vector piloting, the *Slave I* had no problem tracking the ship to Bespin.

IMPERIAL GARRISONS

Major Qol watched as the lecture room filled. The students, an eclectic mix of human and alien Alliance officers, looked grim. They were fresh from a break after the morning's lectures on TIE fighters and Imperial armored vehicles, and were no doubt wondering how a small upstart Rebellion could hope to militarily overcome the Empire, even with the flaws and cracks in Imperial military theory they were being briefed on.

It does look hopeless, Qol thought. The students were cut off from incoming news for the duration of the conference, and hadn't heard about Hoth. Qol wished he could offer them hope.

But hope wasn't his subject today.

"Gentlebeings. I am Major Viran Qol of Alliance Special Forces. I am told I'm one of High Command's leading experts on Imperial fortification engineering. The subject of my lecture today is the theory and application of Imperial garrisons—their background, uses, and weaknesses.

"This is an overview. Please note your questions and save them for the end of the lecture. In the future, feel free to forward queries to my office at High Command. If you plug your datapads into the terminals, you can access the schematics and statistics I'll be referring to."

MOMENT OF DOUBT

OPENING
MAGNETIC
FIELD.

THREE YEARS AFTER
THE BATTLE OF YAVIN.

A SOLITARY FREIGHTER MAKES
ITS WAY THROUGH THE DOCKING
PROCEDURES OF THE STAR
DESTROYER, AVENGER.

IT WAS THE SHIP OF THE
BOUNTY HUNTER, AWARRU
TARK. DARTH VADER HAS
SENT WORD OF A WEIGHTY
COMMISSION ON HAN SOLO
AND LEIA ORGANA.

ALL OUT PORT
SHIELDS CLOSED.
SHIP'S REGISTRY
CONFIRMED.

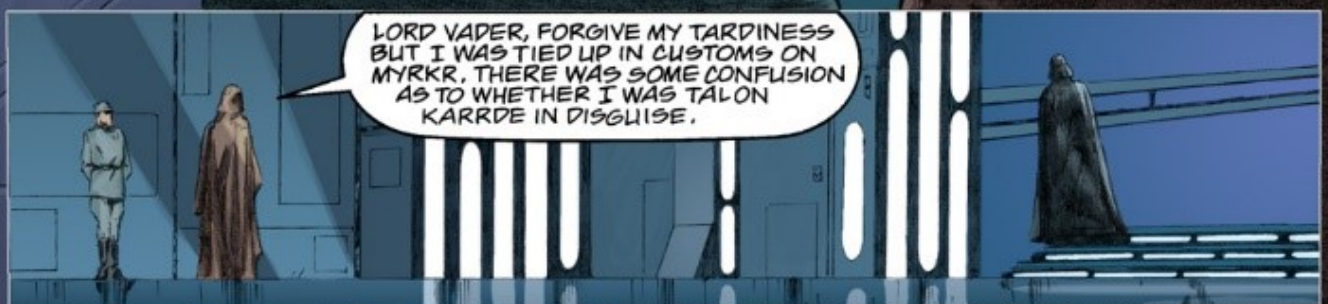
PWSSSHH!

GREETINGS,
SIR. MAY I SEE YOUR
COMMISSION FILES AND
CONFIRMATION?

OF COURSE,
LIEUTENANT
CH'ARB.

NOW LET'S NOT WASTE
ANY MORE OF YOUR MASTER'S
TIME ON FORMALITIES.

IF
YOU WILL
JUST
ACCOMPANY
ME, SIR.







LET'S
GET RIGHT TO
OUR BLOODY
BUSINESS!

THA-WHOOMP!

UWOOP! UWOOP! UWOOP!



IN AN INSTANT,
VADER REALIZES
HIS MISTAKE.

TSSSSHH-K-K-K



HE MISTOOK THE AURA HE
FELT FROM TARK TO BE THE
USUAL ATTITUDE OF KILLERS
WHEN, IN ACTUALITY, IT WAS
HUNGER FOR PREY.

BUT HE DOES NOT
LET THOUGHTS OF
RECRIMINATION
FOG HIS MIND.



THE ATTACK IS FAST
AND PRECISE, TOO
LINEAR AN ATTACK CAN
BE EASILY AVOIDED.

ATTACKS, LIKE PEOPLE,
CAN BE DECEIVING. NOW
VADER HAS HIS ANSWER.



TARK IS A DEADLY FOE,
BUT SO TOO IS VADER.



ONCE MORE THE
SITH LORD HAS
UNDERESTIMATED
HIS OPPONENT.



SHWAKK!

SLAM

VADER'S REFLEXES BARELY SAVE
HIM FROM TARK'S NEXT VOLLEY.
IT OCCURS TO HIM THAT THE
MERCENARY IS JUST HITTING
HIS STRIDE.



ZZAK!

TARK'S RESOURCES
GIVE HIM AN
UNNATURAL EDGE.
FORTUNATELY,
VADER NUMBERS
TELEKINESIS
AS PART OF HIS
ARSENAL.

WHAM!



LORD VADER REGAINS HIS
COMPOSURE AS QUICKLY AS
THE TRAPPED BOLINTY HUNTER
LOSES HIS.



VADER REALIZES
THE EXTENT OF
TARK'S
COMMITMENT
TO HIS DEATH.



TARK IS NOT
THE MAN HE
SEEMS TO BE...
PERHAPS NOT
EVEN A MAN
AT ALL--
RATHER, JUST
A WEAPON.





BUT DARTH VADER
IS AN OPPONENT
LIKE NO OTHER.



TERROR IS VADER'S
WEAPON TO COMMAND.



BUT TERROR, LIKE ANY
WEAPON, CAN BE TURNED
AGAINST ITS WIELDER.



ALL THAT REMAINS OF
VADER LIES JUST UNDER
HIS SPECIALLY BUILT
ARMOR. IN SECONDS, HIS
WEAK, HUMAN SELF
WILL BE EXPOSED.



AS HE FALLS WITHIN DEATH'S GRASP, VADER REACHES INTO HIS OPPONENT'S MIND.



HE USES HIS MENTAL ABILITIES, HOPING TO TAKE CONTROL OF HIS FOE. PUSHING PAST THE HATRED THAT POSSESSES TARK.

NO! NOT TARK, BUT STAUZ CZYCZ. WHO IS THIS MAN? AS QUICKLY AS THE QUESTION FORMS, VADER IS PULLED FURTHER INTO THE ASSASSIN'S MIND.



STAUZ WAS A SOLDIER ON A WORLD WHICH PALPATINE HAD CHOSEN TO MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF.



HE FOUGHT FOR HIS HOME AND FAMILY.



BUT THE WAR ROBBED HIM OF HIS YOUTHFUL DREAMS AND HIS FAMILY.



YAAARRGH!

WELCOMING THE DARKNESS OF HIS LOSS, STAUZ SERVED UP HIS OWN BODY IN EXCHANGE FOR REVENGE.



BUT THIS DEAL HAD A LOOPHOLE THROUGH WHICH STAUZ'S WISH COULD ESCAPE AND HIS SACRIFICE WOULD COME TO NAUGHT.



THE FULL EXTENT OF STAUZ'S WRATH EXPLODES INTO VADER'S INTELLECT.



THE FORCE OF THIS FURY DRIVES VADER FROM STAUZ'S BRAIN AND PARALYZES THE PAIR IN A FIERCE EMBRACE.





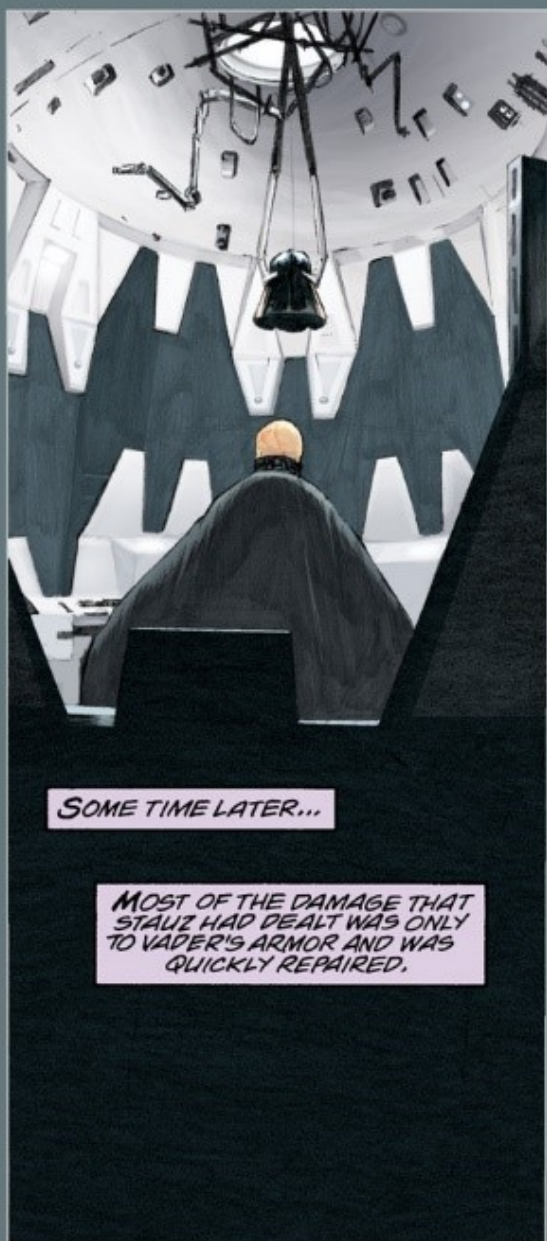
THIS REPRIEVE
PASSES AND
VADER USES HIS
TELEKINETIC
SKILLS TO KILL
THE POWER TO
STALUZ'S
IMPLANTED
FORCE-FIELD
GENERATOR.



VADER PUTS AN END TO
STALUZ'S EXISTENCE, AS
QUICKLY AND BRUTALLY
AS HE HAS ENDED THE
LIVES OF SO MANY BEFORE.



YET, NEVER BEFORE HAS VADER
FACED A FOE SO DEDICATED TO
RAGE, SO PREPARED AND
SCHOOLED IN THE DEALING OF
DEATH. AN ADVERSARY SO MUCH
LIKE HIMSELF.



SOME TIME LATER...

MOST OF THE DAMAGE THAT STAUZ HAD DEALT WAS ONLY TO VADER'S ARMOR AND WAS QUICKLY REPAIRED.



HE CAN FEEL THE STRENGTH RETURNING TO HIS LIMBS, THE BREATH TO HIS LUNGS, AND MORE... HE CAN SMELL THE FEAR OF THOSE AROUND HIM. HIS SELF-CONFIDENCE HAS NOT BEEN SHAKEN.



LORD VADER, SIR, THERE IS A MESSAGE FOR YOU FROM BESPIN.

I WILL RECEIVE THE MESSAGE ON THE BRIDGE.

LORD VADER RISES FROM THIS BATTLE STRONGER THAN BEFORE, AND YET HIS ARMOR HAS BEEN BREACHED... AND HIS MIND TURNS TO THINGS THAT HE HAS NOT CONSIDERED IN MANY YEARS,

HE WONDERS ABOUT A DEAD MAN WHO LOST HIS CHILDREN AND SACRIFICED HIS HUMANITY FOR HIS NEED FOR REVENGE.



DARTH VADER WONDERS ABOUT A FATHER WHO DIED MORE OF A MACHINE THAN A MAN.



END

Shadows Of The Empire

Prologue

He looks like a walking corpse, Xizor thought. Like a mummified body dead a thousand years. Amazing he is still alive, much less the most powerful man in the galaxy. He isn't even that old; it is more as if something is slowly eating him.

Xizor stood four meters away from the Emperor, watching as the man who had long ago been Senator Palpatine moved to stand in the holocam field. He imagined he could smell the decay in the Emperor's worn body. Likely that was just some trick of the recycled air, run through dozens of filters to ensure that there was no chance of any poison gas being introduced into it. Filtered the life out of it, perhaps, giving it that dead smell.

The viewer on the other end of the holo-link would see a close-up of the Emperor's head and shoulders, of an age-ravaged face shrouded in the cowl of his dark zeyd-cloth robe. The man on the other end of the transmission, light-years away, would not see Xizor, though Xizor would be able to see him. It was a measure of the Emperor's trust that Xizor was allowed to be here while the conversation took place.

The man on the other end of the transmission-if he could still be called that-The air swirled inside the Imperial chamber in front of the Emperor, coalesced, and blossomed into the image of a figure down on one knee. A caped humanoid biped dressed in jet black, face hidden under a full helmet and breathing mask:

Darth Vader.

Vader spoke: "What is thy bidding, my master?"

If Xizor could have hurled a power bolt through time and space to strike Vader dead, he would have done it without blinking. Wishful thinking: Vader was too powerful to attack directly.

"There is a great disturbance in the Force," the Emperor said.

"I have felt it," Vader said.

"We have a new enemy. Luke Skywalker."

Skywalker? That had been Vader's name, a long time ago. Who was this person with the same name, someone so powerful as to be worth a conversation between the Emperor and his most loathsome creation? More importantly, why had Xizor's agents not uncovered this before now? Xizor's ire was instant-but cold. No sign of his surprise or anger would show on

his imperturbable features. The Falleen did not allow their emotions to burst forth as did many of the inferior species; no, the Falleen ancestry was not fur but scales, not mammalian but reptilian. Not wild but coolly calculating. Such was much better. Much safer.

"Yes, my master," Vader continued.

"He could destroy us," the Emperor said.

Xizor's attention was riveted upon the Emperor and the holographic image of Vader kneeling on the deck of a ship far away. Here was interesting news indeed.

Something the Emperor perceived as a danger to himself? Something the Emperor feared? "He's just a boy," Vader said, "Obi-Wan can no longer help him."

Obi-Wan. That name Xizor knew. He was among the last of the Jedi Knights, a general. But he'd been dead for decades, hadn't he?

Apparently Xizor's information was wrong if Obi-Wan had been helping someone who was still a boy. His agents were going to be sorry.

Even as Xizor took in the distant image of Vader and the nearness of the Emperor, even as he was aware of the luxury of the Emperor's private and protected chamber at the core of the giant pyramidal palace, he was also able to make a mental note to himself: Somebody's head would roll for the failure to make him aware of all this. Knowledge was power; lack of knowledge was weakness. This was something he could not permit.

The Emperor continued. "The Force is strong with him. The son of Skywalker must not become a Jedi."

Son of Skywalker?

Vader's son! Amazing!

"If he could be turned he would become a powerful ally," Vader said.

There was something in Vader's voice when he said this, something Xizor could not quite put his finger on. Longing? Worry?

Hope? "Yes... yes. He would be a great asset," the Emperor said. "Can it be done?" There was the briefest of pauses. "He will join us or die, Master."

Xizor felt the smile, though he did not allow it to show any more than he had allowed his anger play. Ah. Vader wanted Skywalker alive, that was what had been in his tone. Yes, he had said that the boy would join them or die, but this latter part was obviously meant only to placate the Emperor. Vader had no intention of killing Skywalker, his own son; that was obvious to one as skilled in reading voices as was Xizor. He had not gotten to be the Dark Prince, Underlord of Black Sun, the largest criminal organization in the galaxy, merely on his formidable good looks. Xizor didn't truly understand the Force that sustained the Emperor and made him and Vader so powerful, save to know that it certainly worked somehow. But he did know that it was something the extinct Jedi had supposedly mastered. And now, apparently, this new player had tapped into it. Vader wanted Skywalker alive, had practically promised the Emperor that he would deliver him alive-and converted.

This was most interesting.

Most interesting indeed.

The Emperor finished his communication and turned back to face him. "Now, where were we, Prince Xizor?"


The Dark Prince smiled. He would attend to the business at hand, but he would not forget the name of Luke Skywalker.



DAGOBAH--A DESOLATE
PLANET IN AN EVEN MORE
DESOLATE CORNER OF
THE UNIVERSE.

MAYBE THE LAST PLACE
YOU'D EXPECT TO FIND
THE LAST JEDI...

... AND A LONG-RETIRED
JEDI MASTER.



WHICH IS WHY IT WAS THE
PERFECT PLACE FOR YOUNG
LUKE SKYWALKER TO LEARN
THE WAYS OF THE FORCE
FROM YODA.

PERFECT, UNTIL FIVE
MINUTES AGO.



I'VE
GOT A BAD
FEELING ABOUT
THIS.



BUT BAD
FEELING OR
NOT--I'VE GOT
TO STOP
THAT MAN!

HERE GOES...
NOTHING.



GRASP!



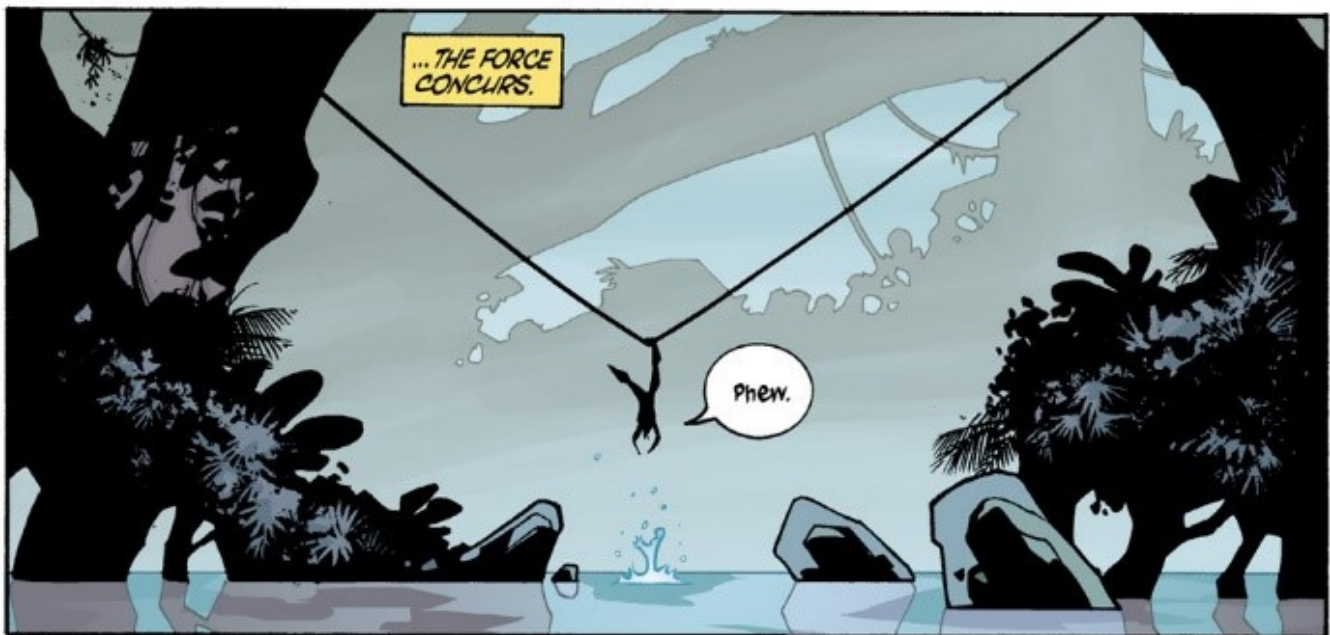
PLUMMETING TO
CERTAIN DEATH,
LUKE REMAINS
IMPRESSIVELY
CALM--

--CONCENTRATING.

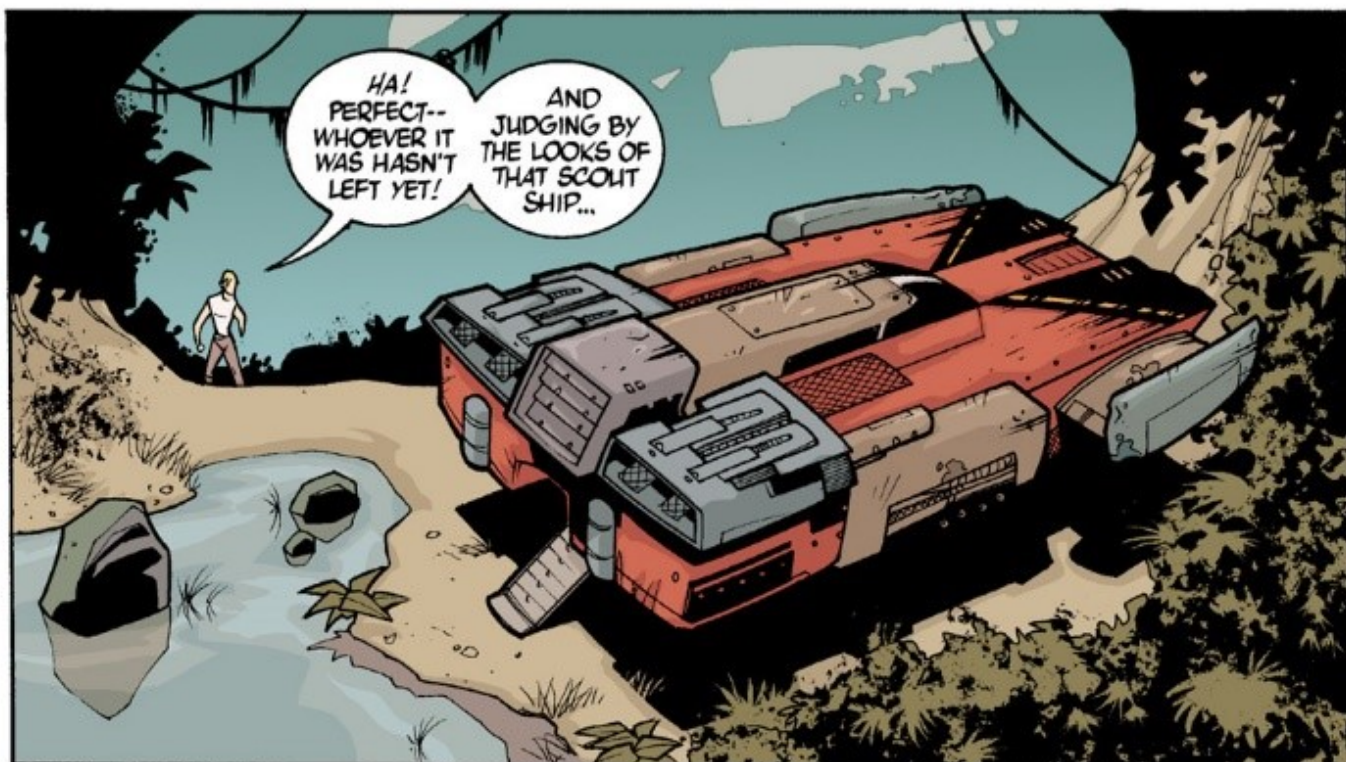
HE'S NOT READY TO
DIE THIS DAY.

NOT HERE.

NOT NOW.











OH, PLEASE BENEFICIAL
AND MAGNIFICENT JEDI
PRIEST PLEASE SPARE
MY WORTHLESS LIFE
I PROMISE...

NOW
WHAT?

...HAVE EIGHT KIDS TO
TAKE CARE OF AND
A SICK MOTHER ON
DANCHIAN PRIME...



I CAN'T JUST LET
HIM GO--AND NO WAY
AM I FAR ENOUGH ALONG
IN MY TRAINING TO MENTALLY
REWIRE HIS MIND LIKE
OBI-WAN COULD.

AND I'M SURE
YODA'S A GOOD
CENTURY TOO OLD
TO PULL IT OFF.

BUT I CAN'T
KILL THIS BOUNTY
HUNTER JUST TO
KEEP A SECRET.

OR
CAN I?

DO I
HAVE A
CHOICE?



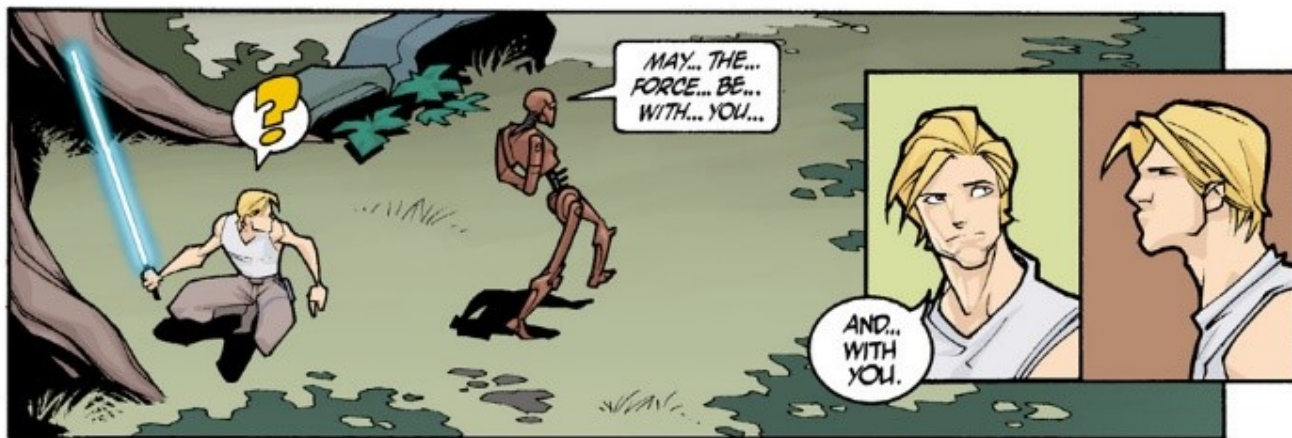
...PROMISE TO FEED
ORPHANS AND CLOTHE
THE POOR AND...

ENOUGH.

YOU'RE
GOING TO
LIVE THIS DAY,
MILKO.

LEAVE,
KNOWING YOUR
LIFE WON'T BE WORTH
A HANDFUL OF
CREDITS AND YOUR
REPUTATION WILL
BE SHATTERED--

-- ONCE IT
GETS OUT THAT
YOU GOT THE
DROP ON A JEDI
KNIGHT AND THEN
HAD TO BEG FOR
YOUR LIFE.



END

A Droid's Eye View

The following passage is the personal account of Artoo-Detoo's experiences on the planet Dagobah, as (rather loosely) interpreted by Arhul Hextrophon some time later.

When Luke first informed Artoo that they were not going to rendezvous with the fleet, but that they were going to someplace called the Dagobah system, the tiny Droid was naturally upset. He became even more disturbed when he accessed the X-wing's astrogation computers and got what little information they had on the remote planet. All indications pointed to the fact that it was no place for Droids, and despite Luke's reassurances, Artoo was worried.

A crash-landing didn't help matters much, nor did falling into a swampy bog. It was dark and murky, but Artoo's sensors compensated and allowed him to move freely. Of course, he took the opportunity to tease his master a bit, letting him sweat it out a little before popping his sensor scope up out of the water. Artoo should have known better than to fool around like that, for the next thing he remembered was being swallowed whole by some sort of muck creature. Luckily the creature didn't care much for Artoo's power grapplers or his arc welder. The giant beast promptly spit the Droid out, launching him well beyond the murky pool and onto the soft soil of the jungle.

The black ooze of the rancid lagoon had seeped into Artoo's circuits, and he was relieved when Master Luke suggested a thorough cleaning. Naturally, with the way the Droid's luck was running, Luke never made it through the cleaning job. He was interrupted by the arrival of an "annoying little alien," who made a mess out of their camp, rummaging through it like a Jawa through a scrap pile. When Artoo tried to stop the little being from stealing a power lamp, the moody alien began to beat at the Droid with his walking stick. Artoo was about to show this little pest just how tough a Droid could be, when Master Luke made him back off and let the annoying little being go about his business.

Artoo never did fully understand his master's behavior on this particular trip, and that worried the loyal Droid. Naturally, when Luke wandered off with this alien, Artoo became alarmed. An order from Luke to stay back and guard the camp didn't help matters much. Within hours, it began to rain. Actually "tor-

rential downpour" was more how Artoo described it. Even for a resourceful Droid, maneuvering on the surface of the swampy planet was nearly impossible. In the rain, the frightening yowls of Dagobah's indigenous lifeforms sounded even more menacing, and Artoo decided it would be most prudent to follow his master.

Creeping up to the window of the tiny clay hut into which his master had crawled, Artoo tried his best sympathy whistles in an attempt to make Luke take notice of him, but the young Rebel was occupied with other thoughts. So, the troubled astromech was resigned to endure the wet evening. Things began to look a bit more cheerful as the weather actually improved over the next few days. Still, Luke was acting strangely, and the reason for he and Artoo being on Dagobah was still unclear to the little Droid. Also unclear were the reasons why his master suddenly began undertaking physical training under the tutelage of the tiny green alien.

Things really started to get out of hand when Master Luke decided to use Artoo in one of his mystical experiments. He nearly dislodged the Droid's dome by dropping the Droid from where he had him levitated about five meters in the air. Soon, however, Artoo could only marvel at the remarkable feats performed by his master. He began to encourage Luke in his mystical endeavors. Once, when Artoo whistled his encouragement to a distraught Luke, who had just failed a difficult test, Yoda, now perceived by Artoo as being somehow wiser and more important, turned and winked at the Droid.

In that moment, Artoo saw Yoda for what he truly was, and Artoo knew that this trip was not a useless waste of time, but rather an essential quest on the part of Luke. It was a mission, and as such, it made Artoo feel important to be included in its accomplishment. Everything began to make sense to the tiny Droid toward the end of their stay on the bog world. He had seen a change come over his master, both physically and mentally.

The youthful exuberance that Luke had once evinced had been replaced by a seriousness and sense of purpose. Naturally Artoo was excited about finally leaving that awful place, and the Droid had gained an understanding about his master, and his master's place in the Galaxy.

A Note from General Madine

Gentlebeings, please take a moment to review the attached intelligence report and technical data on the *Imperial*-class repulsortank. Additional material on Imperial Army armored vehicles is included. Sector commands, mission groups, special operations groups, and free agents may find this material especially interesting.

The Alliance balances between victory and defeat. As I was compiling this report, I received news of an Imperial assault on our new High Command base on Hoth. We were able to evacuate most of our personnel and critical material, but at a high cost. Princess Leia of Alderaan, Commander Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and his co-pilot Chewbacca are among the missing. Analysis of the battle report shows a perfectly executed ground assault by the Imperial commander (at last report General Veers). This need not have been so perfect: if we had only a few more days of preparation we could have delayed the assault for up to another hour and given the Imperials a bloody nose. Our Speizoc v-188 Penetrators, able to damage the attacking AT-ATs, were still in their shipping crates, waiting for emplacement. Our X-wings were reserved for freighter escort, and could not be sent to target the AT-ATs. Air support was restricted to the patrol snowspeeders intended to target much lighter vehicles. Despite their considerable lack of firepower, they were able to destroy a fraction of the walkers through a combination of daring tactics, great bravery, and raw luck.

I hope this information on Imperial repulsortanks can help avoid other defeats like the one recently sustained at Hoth. May you not need it.

Respectfully,
General Madine

CAN THE EMPIRE EVER BE DESTROYED?

STAR THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK WARS™

THE REBEL FORCES HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED. DARTH VADER IS ABOUT TO EXECUTE HIS TERRIBLE REVENGE

OUT ON PATROL IN THE SNOWY WASTES HAN AND HIS TRUSTY TAUNTAUN SPOT THE ENEMY ATTACK



LUKE AND THE PRINCESS ALERT THEIR FORCES ON THE ICE PLANET, HOTH



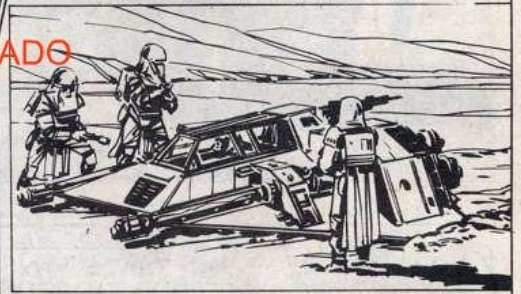
DARTH VADER ORDERS BOSSK AND I.G. 88, THE BOUNTY HUNTERS TO TAKE LUKE ALIVE!



A VICIOUS BATTLE COMMENCES IN SPACE...



...AND ON THE GROUND, STORMTROOPERS CAPTURE A REBEL SNOWSPEEDER



AS THE REBEL FORCES FLEE, LUKE CONSULTS HIS JEDI TEACHER YODA



WHILST HAN AND LEIA ESCAPE TO THE SKYCITY AND MEET LANDO CALRISSIAN WHO ARRIVES IN A TWIN-POD CLOUDCAR



BUT CAN LANDO BE TRUSTED? WILL LUKE RETURN IN TIME? DOES GOOD ALWAYS TRIUMPH OVER EVIL?



ONLY YOU CAN DECIDE... WITH PALITON
ALL NEW STAR WARS ACTION FIGURES AND VEHICLES IN TOYSHOPS NOW

The Life And Legend Of Obi-Wan Kenobi

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thanks to the teachings of Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi was one with the Force.

Where he had been once but an isolated drop of water in a great sea, he was now the sea itself. It was a sea that had no surface or floor, which flowed every-where and through everything. The Force transcended time and space. Civilizations would rise and fall, stars would form and die, but the Force would never end.

As a spiritual entity, Obi-Wan was not hampered by the laws of physics. He could travel across the galaxy from one world to another by merely thinking of the journey . He could not only communicate with the living but manifest an illusion of his former physical self. He could even communicate with fellow spirits, should they be mutually inclined.

After the destruction of the Death Star, Obi-Wan limited his communication with Luke Skywalker. This was not because Obi-Wan's powers would have been in any way diminished by further communication, but because he knew that there were a great many things that Luke could learn only from the living - not only his friends but his enemies as well. More precisely, there were things Luke had to learn for himself, and some-times on his own. Ben was a guiding spirit, not a meddling one.

But Obi-Wan's spirit always remained watchful. After Luke accidentally became catatonic while attempt-ing to use the Force to meditate, Obi-Wan entered Luke's dreams and guided him to conquer his innate fear of Darth Vader. And when the very unprepared Luke and Leia - still unaware of the fact that they were siblings - actually confronted Vader on Mimban, Obi-Wan again intervened, bolstering Luke's abilities to help him defeat the Dark Lord.

Vader should have died on Mimban, Obi-Wan thought ruefully. Just as he should have died on Mustafar, Yavin, and more places than I can name.

And yet Darth Vader lived.

As powerful as Obi-Wan was in spirit, he had no influence over the Sith Lords. In fact, to be anywhere near their proximity was a draining experience for any entity.

And there were other dangers to consider. Yoda had told him that ancient Sith Lords had at least once devel-oped a weapon called the Thought Bomb to destroy Jedi and capture their souls. Obi-Wan did not know whether Palpatine or Vader possessed or were capable of creat-ing a Thought Bomb or if such a weapon could consume an already existing spirit, but

he knew that if he allowed himself to be lured into any Sith-set trap, he would be of little use to Luke.

It was three years after the Battle of Yavin, when the Rebel Alliance had relocated to the ice planet Hoth, that Ben manifested himself as a vision to Luke. Luke had escaped the clutches of a bloodthirsty wampa on his own, but he was also injured and lost, far from the Rebel base. Exhausted by his struggle to survive and by the sub-freezing winds that tore at him from all directions, Luke collapsed against the hard, snow-covered ground.

Obi-Wan spoke. "Luke . . . Luke."

Slowly, Luke raised his head as if it were a massive weight. Obi-Wan appeared as a shimmering, spectral form a short distance in front of him. Obi-Wan could see in Luke's confused expression that he was wondering whether he was hallucinating. Luke said aloud, "Ben? "

Ben said, "You will go to the Dagobah system."

"Dagobah system?" Luke repeated, still confused.

"There you will learn from Yoda," Obi-Wan continued, "the Jedi Master who instructed me."

Luke groaned. "Ben . . . Ben."

Obi-Wan knew that Luke was in shock. But he also knew that help would arrive within seconds, in the form of Han Solo riding a tauntaun. Han Solo would believe that he had arrived upon Luke's position by pure luck, but it was Obi-Wan who had steered Han's mount to the north of the wampa's ice cave.

Obi-Wan dematerialized just a moment before Han arrived upon Luke.

Obi-Wan's spirit monitored Luke's recovery in the bacta tank at the Rebel base, and through the terrible battle at Hoth. When the Rebels were forced to evacuate, he watched Luke's progress. He did not intervene when Luke crash-landed his X-wing into the Dagobah swamp - Obi-Wan did not want Luke to leave before his training was complete.

Obi-Wan was a secret witness to the moment Luke unknowingly met Yoda, who was reluctant to introduce himself until he was convinced of Luke's conviction to study the ways of the Jedi. Obi-Wan even watched with some amusement as Yoda offered to take Luke to meet "the Jedi Master" he sought, only to bring Luke to his own low-ceilinged hut under the large roots of an ancient tree.

Addressing Luke as he prepared some food in a steaming pot, Yoda said, "Why wish you become Jedi? Hm? "

"Mostly because of my father, I guess," Luke replied.

"Ah, father," Yoda said with interest. "Powerful Jedi was he, mmm, powerful Jedi, mmm. "

"Oh, come on!" Luke said angrily. "How could you know my father? You don't even know who I am. Oh, I don't know what I'm doing here. We're wasting our time."

Yoda looked away from Luke and leaned his weight onto the gimer stick that he used as a walking staff. Obi-Wan sensed the aged Jedi Master's disappointment even before he said, "I cannot teach him. The boy has no patience."

"He will learn patience," Obi-Wan said aloud, his voice echoing slightly within the hut.

Startled by the disembodied voice, Luke glanced around the hut, searching for Obi-Wan.

"Hmmm," muttered Yoda. He turned slowly to face Luke. Speaking to Obi-Wan, he said, "Much anger in him, like his father."

Obi-Wan's voice replied, "Was I any different when you taught me? "

"Hah," Yoda said. "He is not ready."

Luke finally stopped looking for Obi-Wan and looked into his host's wise old eyes. Luke gasped, "Yoda!"

Yoda nodded.

"I am ready," Luke protested. " I . . . Ben ! I . . . I can be a Jedi. Ben, tell him I'm ready." Luke started to get up, only to smack his head in the hut's ceiling.

"Ready, are you?" Yoda said with disdain. "What know you of ready? For eight hundred years have I trained Jedi. My own counsel will I keep on who is to be trained ! A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind." Tilting his head back to address the invisible Obi-Wan, Yoda continued, "This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away . . . to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph." He raised his gimer stick and jabbed Luke. "Adventure. Heh ! Excitement. Heh ! A Jedi craves not these things." Then he lowered his gimer stick, glared at Luke and said, "You are reckless!"

Obi-Wan said, "So was I, if you remember."

"He is too old," Yoda said firmly. "Yes, too old to begin training."

Luke said desperately, "But I've learned so much."

Yoda sighed. Again addressing Obi-Wan's spirit, he asked, "Will he finish what he begins?"

Luke did not wait for Obi-Wan's answer, and said, "I won't fail you."

Yoda returned his gaze to Luke, who added, "I'm not afraid."

"Oh," Yoda said, his eyes widening slightly. Lowering his voice to a threatening tone, he said, "You will be. You will be. "

Luke's training was brutal. Not just the obstacle courses that had him climbing vines and leaping through the swamp with Yoda secured to his back, but also the meditation exercises to open himself to the Force. Luke obeyed Yoda's every instruction and never broke down.

Obi-Wan's spirit silently watched Luke's progress as the young man tackled every challenge. Every day, he's getting stronger, Obi-Wan thought.

Still, Luke was limited by his self-doubts, and his impulse to confront danger. He had entered a cave that was inexplicably strong with the dark side of the Force, only to have a nightmarish confrontation with an apparition of Darth Vader. He had refused to believe the Force could be used to elevate his sinking X-wing until Yoda showed him that it was possible. Even more crippling were his fears, especially after meditation had yielded a vision of the future, of a city in the clouds, where his friends Leia and Han would meet with pain.

"I've got to go to them," Luke said.

Yoda sighed. "Decide you must how to serve them best. If you leave now, help them you could. But you would destroy all for which they have fought and suffered."

And yet Luke decided to leave Dagobah. As darkness fell, Luke put on his orange flight suit and checked his gear while R2-D2 positioned himself into the X-wing's astromech socket.

"Luke!" said Yoda, watching from a nearby knoll. "You must complete the training."

"I can't keep the vision out of my head," Luke replied as he hastily inspected his ship. "They're my friends. I've got to help them."

"You must not go! " Yoda said desperately.

Luke faced Yoda and said, "But Han and Leia will die if I don't. "

"You don't know that," replied the disembodied voice of Obi-Wan's spirit. If Yoda can't convince Luke to stay, perhaps I can.

Turning in response to Obi-Wan's voice, Luke watched as a slightly shimmering light began to glow in the air behind Yoda. Then the light materialized into the form of Obi-Wan, who said gravely, "Even Yoda can-not see their fate."

"But I can help them!" Luke said. "I feel the Force!"

"But you cannot control it," Obi-Wan said. "This is a dangerous time for you, when you will be tempted by the dark side of the Force."

Yoda said, "Yes, yes. To Obi-Wan you listen. The cave. Remember your failure at the cave!"

"But I've learned so much since then, Master Yoda," Luke said as he returned his attention to his X-wing. "I promise to return and finish what I've begun. You have my word."

Obi-Wan said, "It is you and your abilities the Emperor wants. That is why your friends are made to suffer."

"That's why I have to go, " Luke said.

"Luke," Obi-Wan said, "I don't want to lose you to the Emperor the way I lost Vader." To himself, Obi-Wan added, The way I lost Anakin.

"You won't, " Luke said.

Yoda said, "Stopped they must be. On this all depends. Only a fully trained Jedi Knight with the Force as his ally will conquer Vader and his Emperor." As Luke stowed the last of his gear onto the X-wing, Yoda continued, "If you end your training now, if you choose the quick and easy path, as Vader did, you will become an agent of evil."

"Patience," Obi-Wan said with emphasis, hoping Luke would carry the word with him.

"And sacrifice Han and Leia?" Luke snapped. He was anything but patient.

Yoda answered, "If you honor what they fight for . . . yes!"

Luke reached for the lower rung of the X-wing's retractable ladder and looked away from Obi-Wan and Yoda. Obi-Wan said, "If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere."

"I understand," Luke muttered. Then he climbed the ladder to the starfighter's open cockpit and said, "Artoo, fire up the converters."

As the X-Wing's engines fired up, Obi-Wan said, "Luke, don't give in to hate - that leads to the dark side."

"Strong is Vader," Yoda added. "Mind what you have learned. Save you it can."

"I will," Luke said as he pulled on his helmet. "And I'll return. I promise." The cockpit canopy lowered, and the X-wing lifted off from the ground and ascended into the night sky.

As Yoda raised his gaze to watch the departing X-Wing, Obi-Wan's luminous apparition faded into the darkness. Yoda sighed, looked down at the ground, and shook his head sadly. "Told you, I did," he said. "Reckless is he. Now matters are worse."

Obi-Wan's disembodied voice said, "That boy is our last hope."

Yoda returned his gaze to the sky and said, "No . There is another."

Obi-Wan knew Yoda was speaking of Luke's sister, Leia. Although Leia shared Luke's bloodline and was certainly strong-willed, and although Obi-Wan had always respected Yoda's beliefs, he somehow remained convinced that only one person could defeat the Sith Lords, and that person was Luke.

Meeting The Dark Lord

The following is a personal account of Lando Calrissian's first meeting with Darth Vader, as told by Lando.

It was one of those incredibly bright, beautiful days when you know something's just got to go wrong. Of course, when I'm talking about something going "wrong," I'm usually talking

about a brawl down in Port Town or a Cloud Car accident or a union dispute. But when I was informed that an Imperial shuttle carrying Lord Darth Vader and a platoon of Imperial stormtroopers had arrived, "one of those days" became "that day" that I've always feared would come.

I wasn't exactly sure how to greet him as I strode across the landing platform to meet the Dark Lord. What do you say to someone like that?

"Are you here for business or pleasure?" didn't sound quite right to me. Anyway, I hoped the right words would come to me, and I hoped that this was just some kind of inconsequential visit. Whatever the reason for Vader's coming, I had Lobot and a squad of Wing Guards nearby, just in case.

I wasn't sure whether or not Vader was aware of the fact that Cloud City was not a member of the Imperial Mining *Guild*, or whether or not he knew that we were not an officially registered colony at all. But my worries about this being an official visit were *quickly* relieved as I saw Boba Fett step out of the shuttle just ahead of the Dark Lord. There was nothing "official" about this killer. Where he was involved, the situation was either personal - very personal - or profitable. I had run into this bounty hunter once before, and I wasn't eager to run into him a second time.

Vader stepped from the entry ramp and strode past everyone to come chest-to-face with me. He was a giant of a man, if he even was a man. I could feel the heat issuing from his helmet as he spoke. I felt a certain tightness in my throat.

"Are you Calrissian?" he asked flatly.

"I am," was my only reply.

He took a few seconds to study me, and it seemed as if he were peering directly into my thoughts. "I *would* speak with you," he said.

"Be my guest," was my smug answer.

I felt tightness around my esophagus once more as he responded, "In private."

The Dark Lord gestured and spoke as he began to stride across the platform. "An honor guard will not be necessary," he hissed. Apparently, he knew where my men were hidden. "I am here about a personal matter. A matter which may prove ... mutually beneficial."

I was trying my best not to be intimidated, but failing miserably. "Sounds interesting," was my all-too-cool reply. "Why don't you step into my office?" I turned to face him then, "Leave the bounty hunter behind. His kind makes me nervous."

I didn't know how Vader would react to that, and, surprisingly, he answered with, "As you wish."

Behind me, I could hear the sound of Fett's wrist lasers powering up, but I didn't even turn around. There would be another time and place for that. It was obvious after my initial, tentative probing, made during our first discussion, that Vader was prepared to make certain allowances in order to achieve his ends, and I would try to take advantage of that fact. He had apparently done research into my background, since he mentioned my former friendship with Han Solo. I had heard that Han had a price on his head, but I didn't know the Empire was after him. The old pirate was certainly hip deep in it now. It wouldn't do any good to deny that I knew Han, so I tried a different approach.

"That lousy, no-good swindler still owes me quite a bit," I snapped. Naturally, that gambit backfired.

"Good," the Dark Lord replied. "Then, I'm certain I will have your complete cooperation in this matter."

My heart sank when the Dark Lord hit me with the deal. It was the life of an old friend in exchange for total security. My initial impulse was to turn Vader down. But staring into that black, lifeless mask, I knew that I really had no choice in the matter, and that I should take what I could get, while I could get it, and while I was still alive to get it. After all, a lot of people's livelihoods were at stake here. Perhaps, I could help Han somehow when he arrived, without Vader knowing about it. I had Lobot and the Wing Guard to help me, but I wasn't sure what good they would do against this mystical servant of evil and his powerful Empire.

The deal smelled rotten from the very beginning, but I would have to play along with it, at least until something better came along. Eventually, it did. In the form of a Princess, a Wookiee, two Droids, and a lost cause.

The Price Of Victory

Dark Side Campaign: Scenario 3: Before the Storm

You're called to the ready room of Captain Lennox for a conference. 'We've received a communication. From Lord Vader,' he says. You take a seat and a hologram of the Dark Lord of the Sith appears.

'Now that the operation on Hoth has concluded, I have a new assignment for the Tyrant,' says the image of Darth Vader. 'Go to the Beshin system. Remove a Jedi diplomat who undermines the Empire's negotiations on Cloud City. You failed to capture the traitor. Do not fail me again.' With that ominous threat, the hologram ends.

'Take care of this Jedi scum,' says Lennox.

Two days later, the Tyrant enters the Beshin system. A shuttle takes you to a landing pad on Cloud City. A slim, robed figure waits there. 'I am Rachi Sitra,' she says. She removes her hood and you see her Twi'lek head tails. Her eyes dart for a moment to the stormtroopers coming down the shuttle ramp behind you.

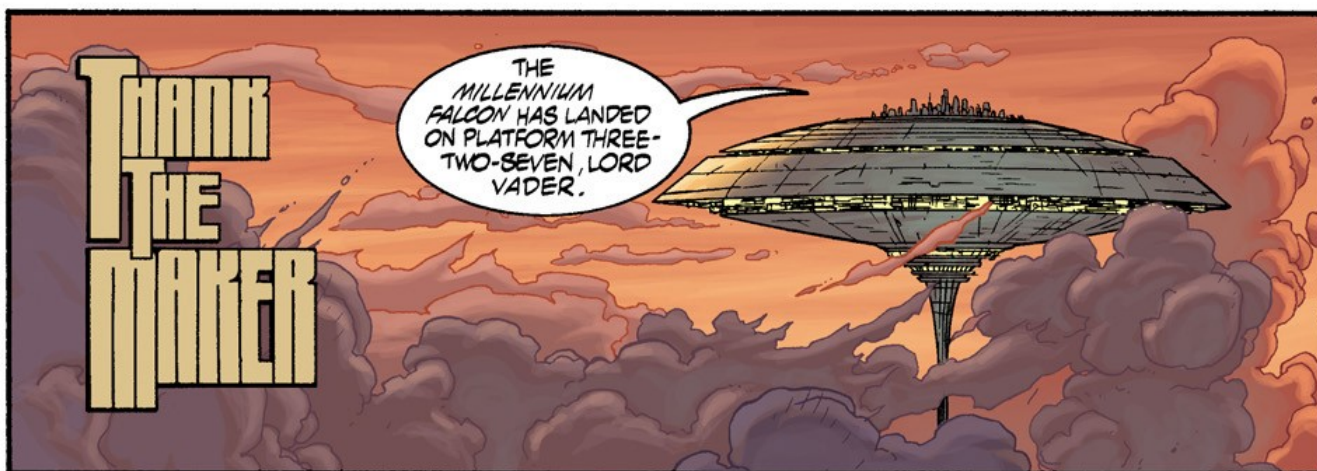
'We have much to discuss,' you say. The blaster carbines of your troopers clatter into firing position. 'You are a member of the Rebel Alliance. The Empire has dealings with Cloud City that must be completed. You are an obstruction that must be removed.'

Rachi smiles slightly. 'This assignment will prove to be more difficult than a lackey like you can handle,' she says. A lightsaber ignites in her hand and she assumes a combat stance. 'Return to your Star Destroyer and leave Cloud City now.'

With a simple hand gesture from you, the stormtroopers begin firing. The Jedi whirls her lightsaber to block the blaster bolts. The battle is joined.

The battle rages back and forth across the wide expanse of the Cloud City landing pad. Your superior numbers and Imperial training begin to decide the conflict. The Jedi is forced to retreat dangerously close to the edge. With a dramatic leap, she escapes from your circle of stormtroopers and lands near an Actis snubfighter. The cockpit opens and she quickly climbs aboard. Before your troopers can react, the fighter lifts off and blasts away into the clouds of Beshin.

'We drove that Jedi out of Cloud City,' you say to your trooper squad leader. 'She won't interfere with the Empire's business here again.' The trooper nods in agreement.



THANK
THE
MAKER

THE
MILLENNIUM
FALCON HAS LANDED
ON PLATFORM THREE-
TWO-SEVEN, LORD
VADER.



PRINCESS LEIA IS
WITH CAPTAIN SOLO
AND HIS COPILOT. THERE'S
A DROID, TOO. BARON
ADMINISTRATOR CALRISSIAN
IS LEADING THEM INTO
CLOUD CITY NOW.

IT WAS LUCKY
THE MILLENNIUM
FALCON'S HYPERDRIVE
WAS DAMAGED, OR WE
WOULDN'T HAVE REACHED
THE BESPIN SYSTEM
BEFORE THE
REBELS!

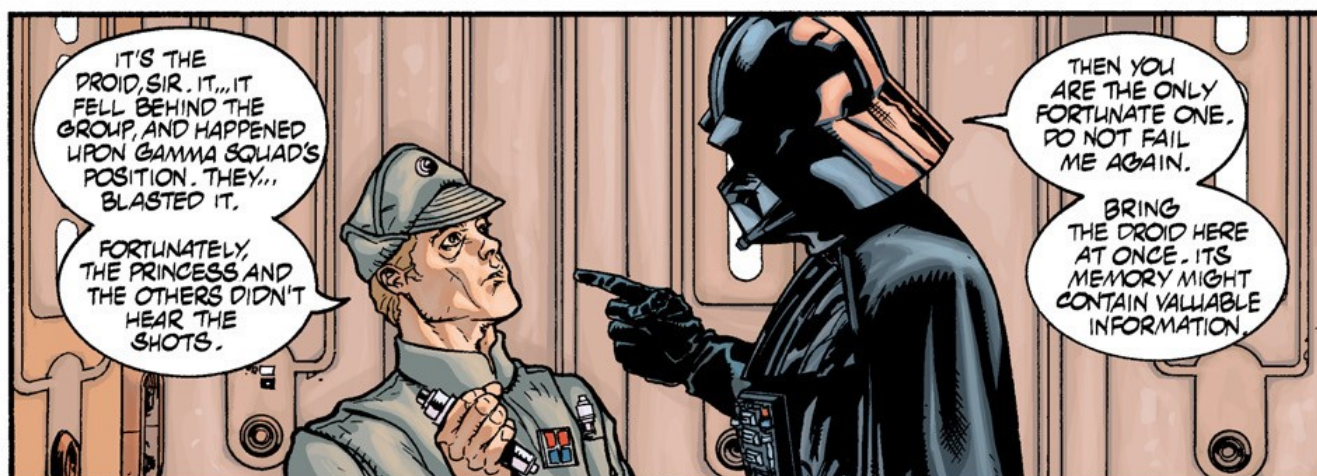


OUR JOURNEY
TO BESPIN HAD
NOTHING TO DO
WITH LUCK,
LIEUTENANT
SHECKIL.

REMAND
YOUR MEN
TO STAY OUT OF
SIGHT. THE CAPTURE
OF THE REBELS
WILL BE AT MY
COMMAND.

YES,
SIR.
I'LL--

WHAT?
THE
IMBECILES!



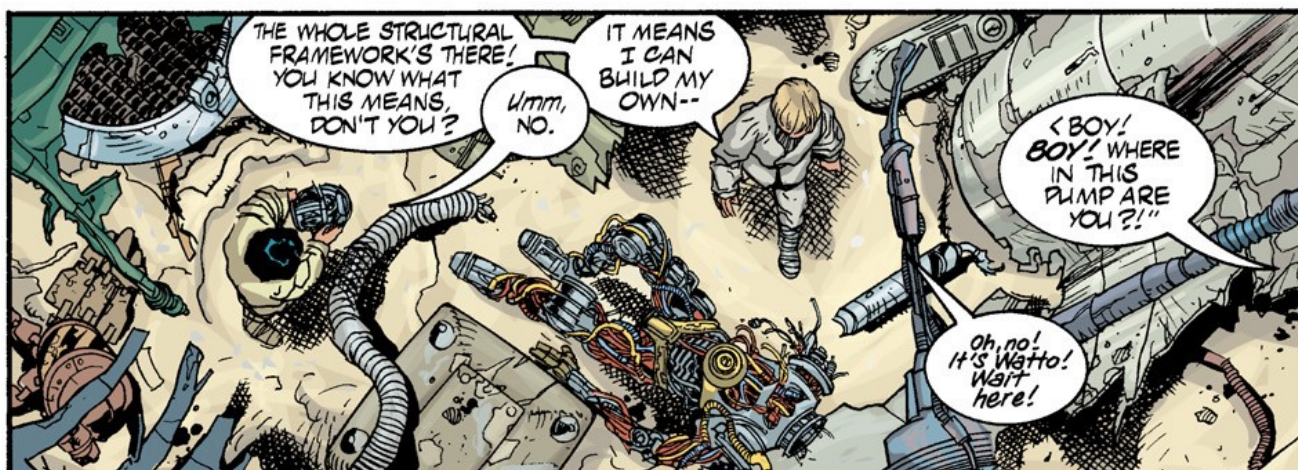
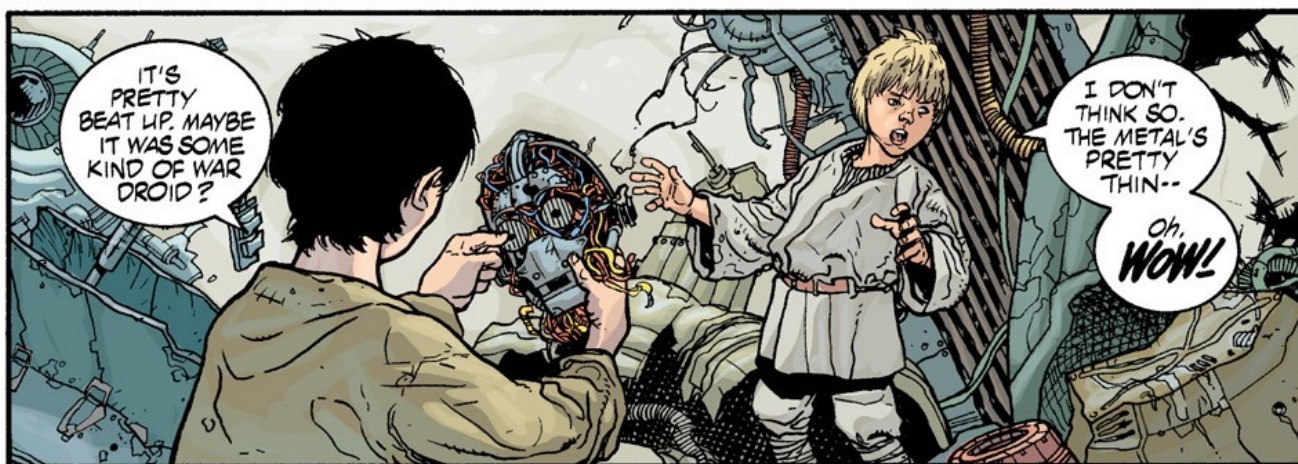
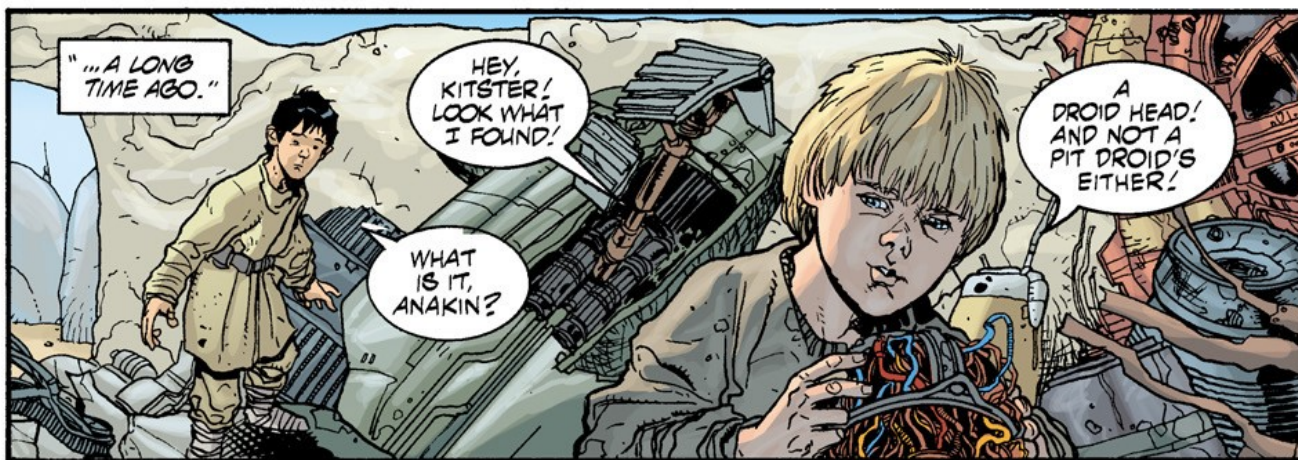
IT'S THE
DROID, SIR. IT...IT
FELL BEHIND THE
GROUP, AND HAPPENED
UPON GAMMA SQUAD'S
POSITION. THEY...
BLASTED IT.

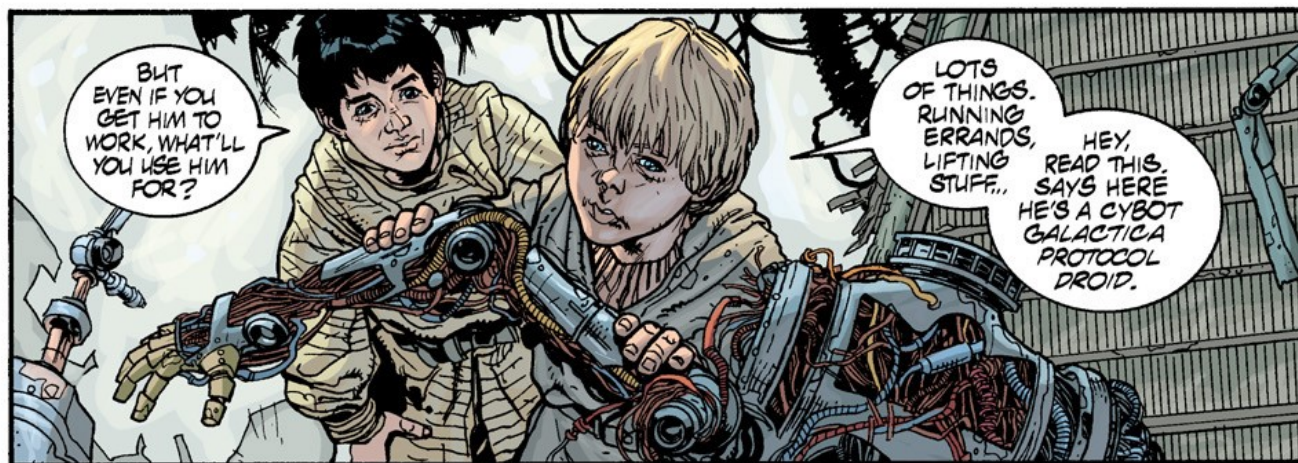
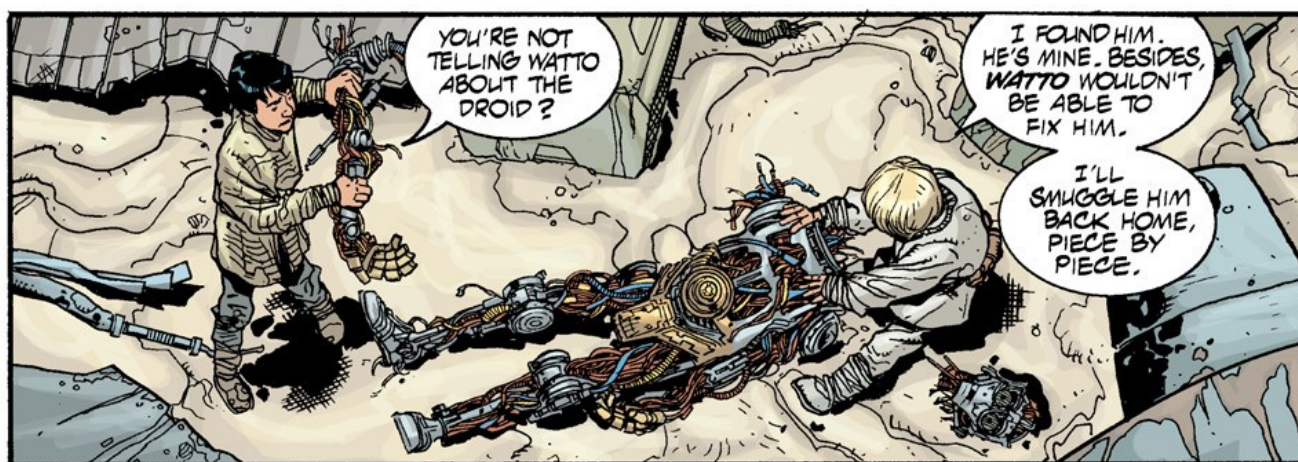
FORTUNATELY,
THE PRINCESS AND
THE OTHERS DIDN'T
HEAR THE
SHOTS.

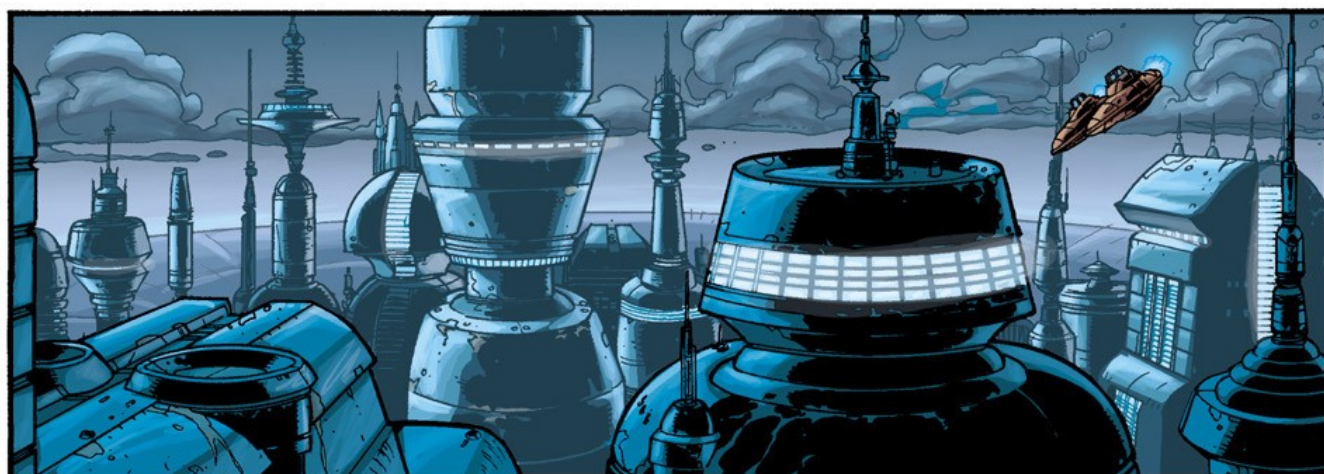
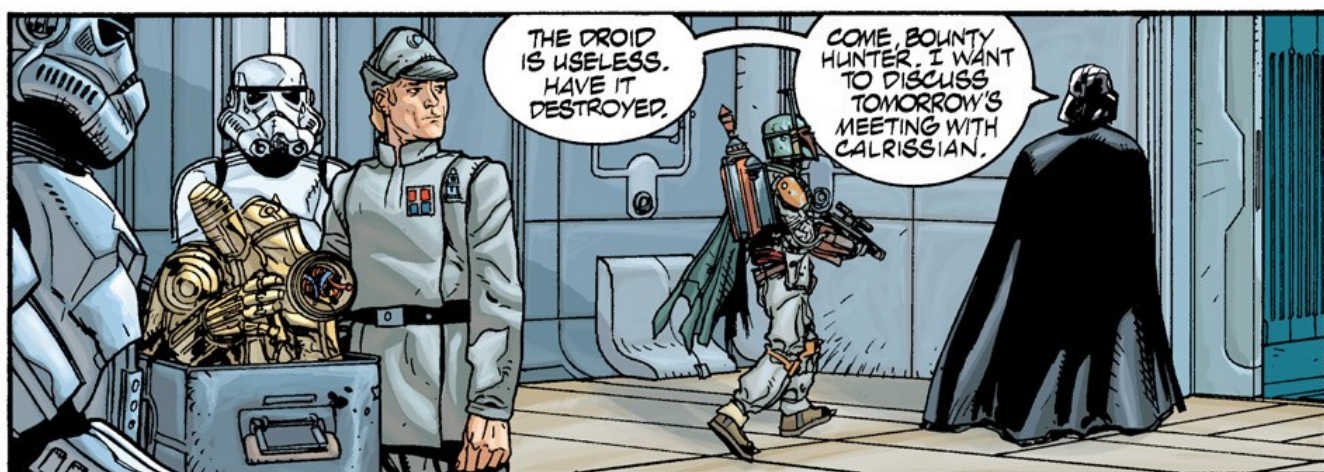
THEN YOU
ARE THE ONLY
FORTUNATE ONE.
DO NOT FAIL
ME AGAIN.

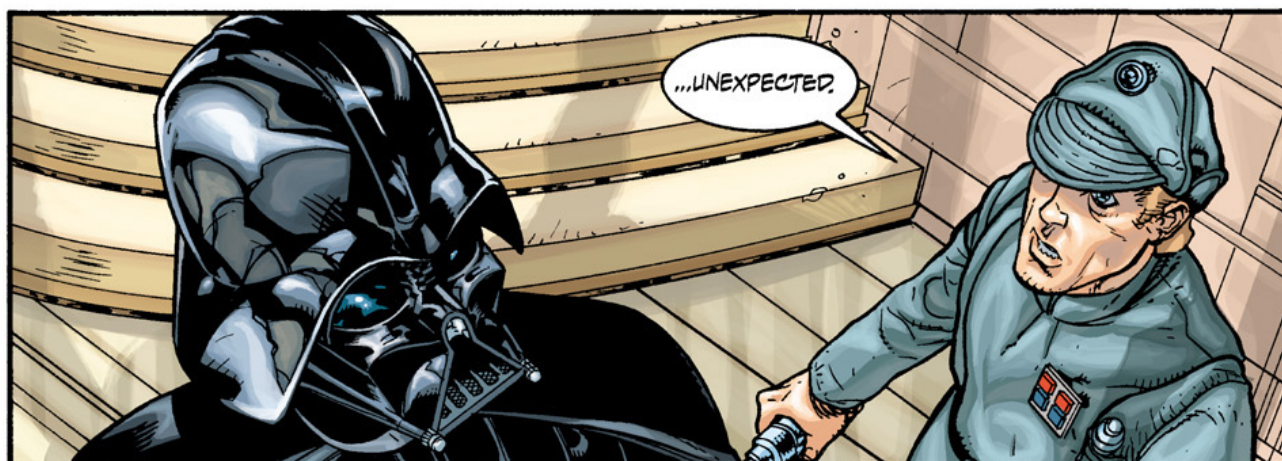
BRING
THE DROID HERE
AT ONCE. ITS
MEMORY MIGHT
CONTAIN VALLUABLE
INFORMATION.

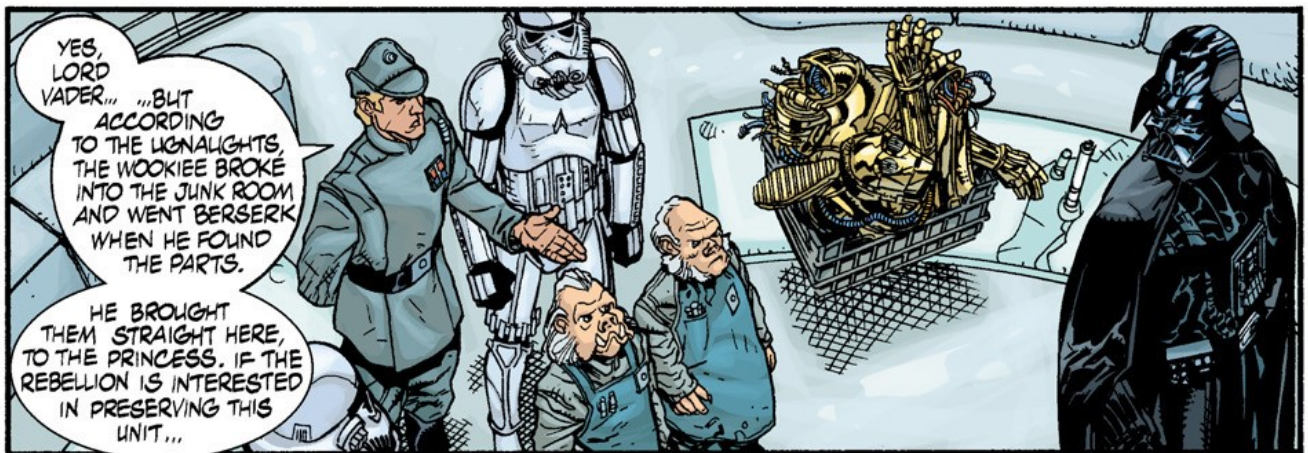


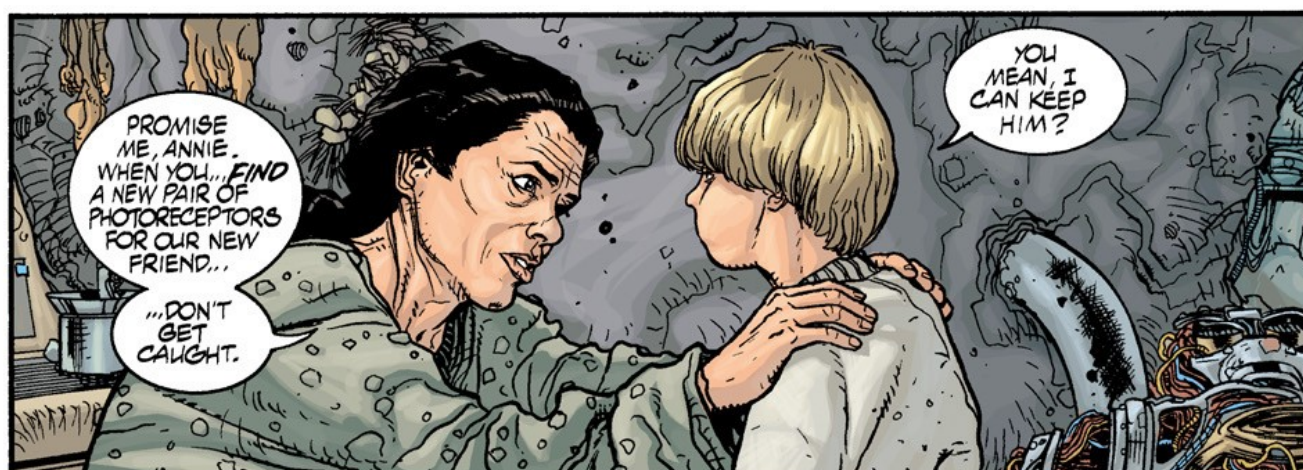
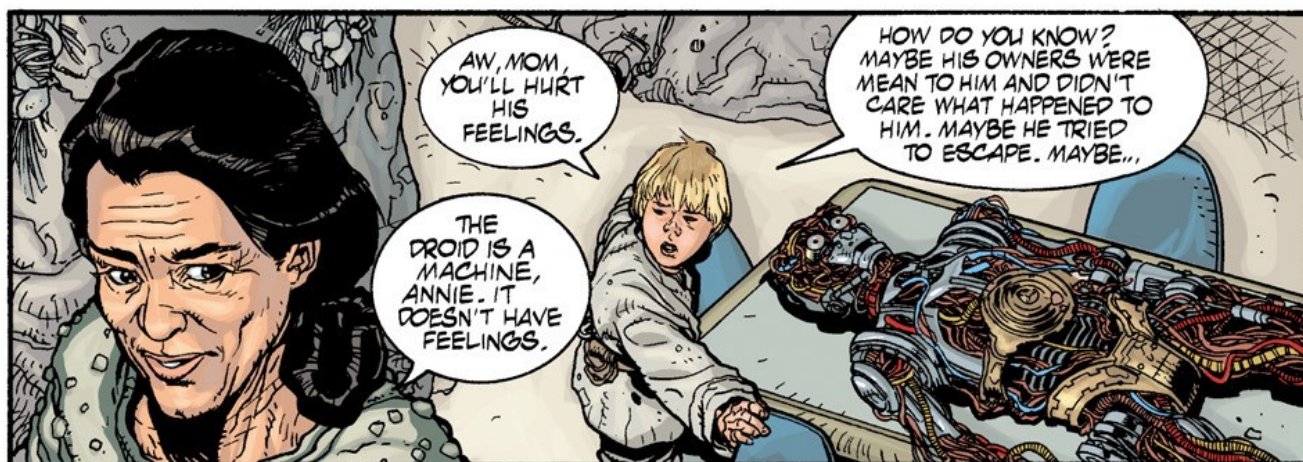
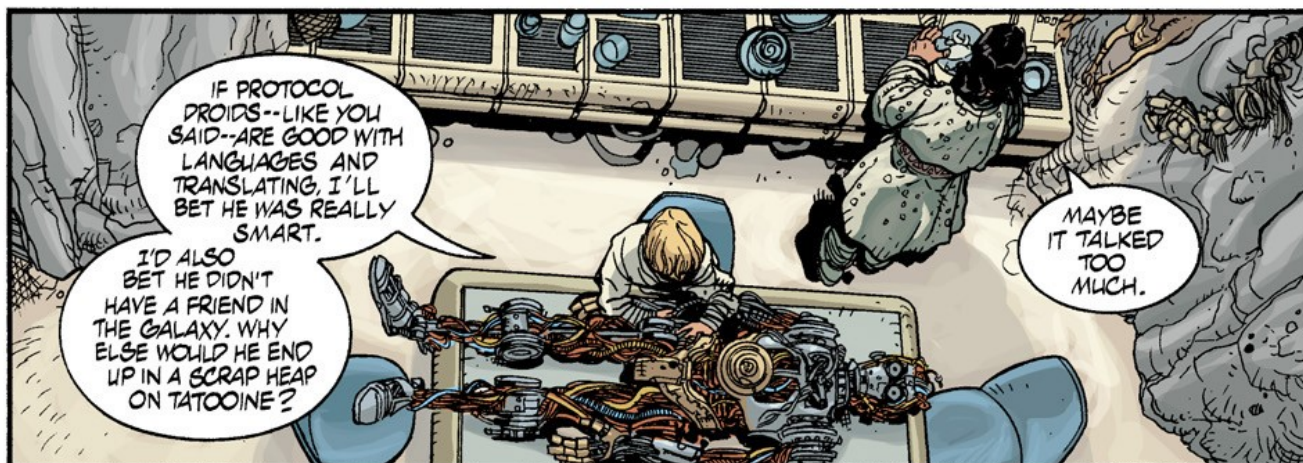


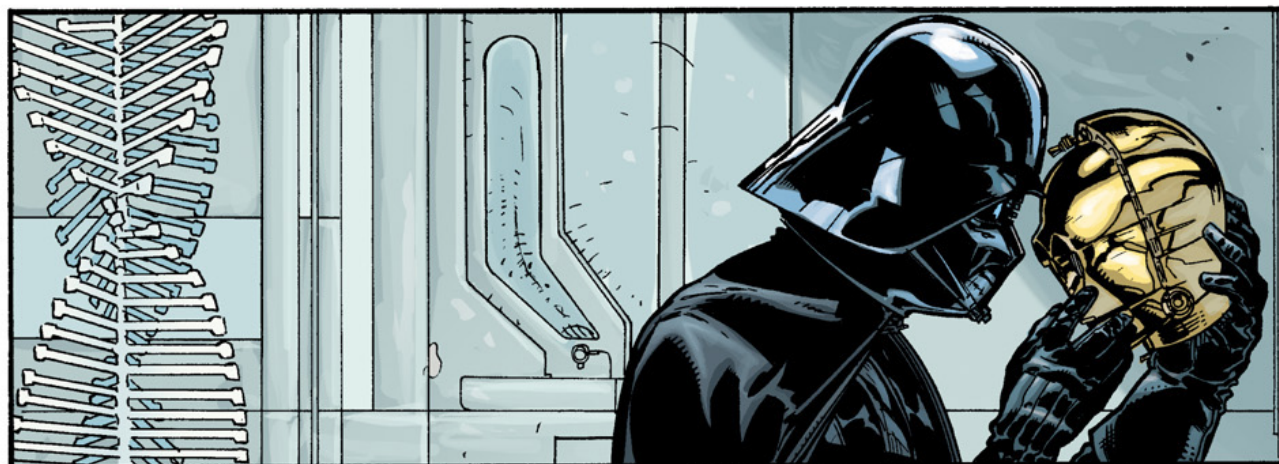
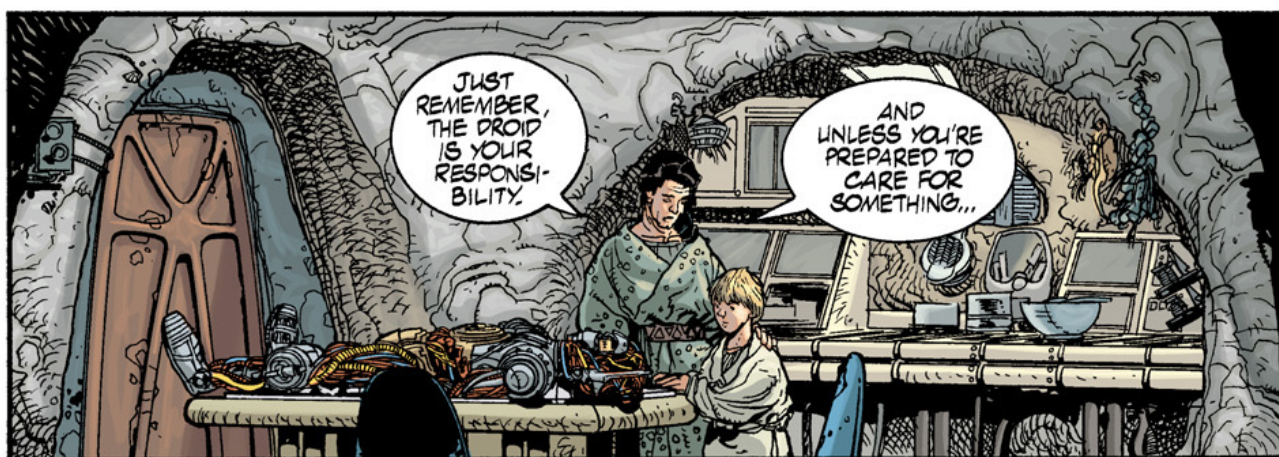














Up the Intelligence Ladder

Lando Calrissian anxiously followed Lord Darth Vader as he stalked out of the Cloud City detention tower cell. "Lord Vader, what about Leia and the Wookiee?"

Vader stopped at the turbolift and turned. "They must never again leave this city."

Lando advanced. "That was never a condition of our agreement, nor was giving Han to this bounty hunter!"

"Perhaps you think you are being treated unfairly?"

Lando backed off. "No."

"Good," Vader snarled. "It would be unfortunate if I had to leave a garrison here."

• • •

Lieutenant Djirra was flustered. As Lord Vader's logistics officer, he had been responsible for preparing one of Cloud City's carbon-freeze chambers to place a human subject into hibernation. Now there was the possibility a garrison would have to be left behind here.

True, it might just be the idle gossip of stormtroopers with too much time on their hands. But the story *sounded* right — it was certainly the sort of threat Vader would make. If it proved to be more than a threat, Djirra would be the one charged with carrying it out, and Vader would want it done immediately.

Djirra had already decided that Captain Treece would make the ideal commanding officer. He was a veteran of several occupations and was strict enough to keep unrest to a minimum.

First, Portent had to be found. An undercover diplomatic agent for the Empire, he had helped to arrange the Imperials' expedient entry into Cloud City. His assistance in the subjugation of the local government would be invaluable if the Empire were to leave a presence here ...

• • •

General Sendo knelt before Xizor in the Prince's audience chambers. "Rise, my servant," Xizor said. "What vital news have you brought me?"

"My Prince," Sendo began. "We have received several scandocs through various channels confirming that Darth Vader has left a garrison behind on the Bespin mining colony of Cloud City."

Xizor nodded and filed the information away in his mind. It would be useful to know should Black Sun plan any operations at the little facility.

"There is more, your majesty," Sendo continued. "Apparently Lord Vader failed in his mission to capture the Rebel known as Skywalker. The Emperor has recalled him to Coruscant."

"Thank you, General," Xizor said smoothly. "You have been most helpful." Sendo bowed, turned and left the audience chamber under Guri's watchful eye.

So, Vader is returning again, Xizor thought. And he has failed to bring his son into the Imperial fold. None of this was news to him. Five of his usual informants on Lord Vader's affairs had already transmitted similar findings. Of course, word of Vader's failure was so sweet as to be worth hearing, again and again and again ...

The Price Of Victory

Dark Side Campaign: Scenario 4: Cloud City Police

'I have dealt with the Jedi diplomat,' you report to the hologram image of Captain Lennox.

'I have another task for you,' says Lennox. 'Rebel sympathizers are meeting with contacts in the lower levels of Cloud City. Root them out and remove them as a threat.' Lennox provides intel that includes locations and names for you to investigate.

You descend level after level, moving from the landing pads atop the mining platform to the criminal underworld beneath. Citizens going about their business slink out of the way when your squad of stormtroopers marches past.

In Bespin's underworld, seedy criminal types lurk in the shadows. An illegal deal is being made on every dark corner. Dimly lit cantinas are meeting places for smugglers and slavers. Arriving at one of locations mentioned in the intelligence report, you search for the clandestine Rebels and their Ugnaught contact. Everyone in the cantina stops talking when your squad enters.

Suddenly, an announcement blares from speakers throughout Cloud City. 'Attention! This is Lando Calrissian. The Empire has taken control of the city. I advise everyone to leave before more Imperial troops arrive.'

Panicked citizens pour out of the buildings and into the darkened street. Every passageway and plaza is choked with evacuating residents. As you try to find your way amidst the chaos, a group of Cloud City police block your path. Behind them is Calrissian's chief administrative aide, a cyborg named Lobot.

The policemen look to Lobot for instructions. He makes a few quick hand gestures without saying a word. The Cloud City troopers pull out their blaster pistols and take up combat positions.

'You are under arrest,' says a Wing Guard corporal. You'll have to fight your way out of this situation.

When his Wing Guard can't contain your Imperial stormtroopers, Lobot tells his men to cease fire and throws up his hands in surrender. They'll no longer impede your progress to the surface. Now it's time to find out what they know about the Rebels.

Little Girl Lost

The following was told to Voren Na'al by young Allania Jakien, and later corroborated by several other eyewitnesses.

"Attention! This is Lando Calrissian. The Empire has taken control of the city. I advise everyone to leave before more Imperial troops arrive."

It was unfortunate for 11-year old Allania Jakien that she was off playing in the Ugnaught tunnels when this announcement was made. Her parents were both be at work at the time - Dad in the Tibanna gas refinery all the way on the other side of the city, and Mom 10 levels up in the Hofiday Towers restaurant.

Allania was supposed to be at class, but she and her friends had decided to play hooky today, having sent in sick messages for each other as a cover. So when the announcement was made, there was no way for her mother and father to reach her, and very little chance that she could get to them before the panic started.

One of Allania's companions, a fair-haired boy named Handy, turned to her as the comlink abruptly switched off; "What do we do now, Allie?"

Handy had always looked to Allie as the leader of their little expeditions into the Ugnought tunnels, as had the other children. This was mostly because Allie had befriended a young Ugnought child who spent time showing her around the complex maze of passages, leaving Allie with a pretty fair knowledge of how to get around down below the city. Allie was remarkably composed for her age, especially in moments of crisis such as this. "Better head for the big tunnel," she ordered smoothly. Handy simply nodded and followed her on hands and knees into a cramped pipeline. When they reached the "big tunnel," a central juncture point connecting some 20 smaller tunnels, they could hear the sounds of panic and fear echoing up through the pipeline from every direction. The sounds of clattering armored boots could be heard distinctly above the din, and from what Allie's father had told her about Imperial stormtroopers, this sounded like them.

Allie knew that if the stormtroopers were invading the city, it would be a while before they could reach the lower levels. With this in mind, she decided not to ascend and try to find her mother, but rather to cut across the city's innards, in an attempt to reach the Tibanna gas refinery and her father.

The Ugnought tunnels stretched across the interior of Cloud City, but they were slow going, and the young fugitives were soon forced to take to the corridors for speed's sake. Everywhere they saw the sights of pandemonium as people fled in every direction. But Allie and her frightened young friend thought it best to keep to the shadows and avoid contact with grownups wherever possible until they reached her father.

Allie became more and more confident as she went on, but all she managed to do in reality was get herself lost. So lost that she took a terribly wrong turn and wound up face-to-face with a squad of stormtroopers!

Allie imagined that they were probably smiling beneath their hideous masks as she darted beneath their legs and scrambled for a ventilation shaft at the far end of the corridor.

As she turned to see if Handy had made it past, she saw the lead trooper pick her friend up by his elbows, but he paid for it as this position allowed the feisty young tyke to kick the trooper repeatedly in the face.

The other troopers laughed at this, but Allie didn't wait around to see what happened next. Handy was done for, and it was up to her to reach her father alone now.

Leaving the stormtroopers far behind, Allie found herself in a section of the city that she had never seen before. It was dark here, and somehow sinister, as deep shadows spilled eerie shapes out into the metallic ventilation shafts. A strange buzzing sound seemed to be emanating from somewhere nearby, something that Allie had never heard before. As the noise grew louder, she saw bright blue and red flashes of light dancing on the metal surface of the shaft, its origin just around a bend ahead. She knew somehow that this

was probably a mistake, but there was something hypnotic about the noise and the light. Something which drew her around the corner despite her better judgment. Upon rounding the bend, the little girl was witness to a startling sight. Through a metal grating she saw two men locked in some sort of unusual combat. They carried swords of bright colored light, and slashed at each other with a grace and power which reminded Allie of some sort of ritual dance.

The larger man was a fearsome sight, swathed in black cloak and armor and towering above his adversary. But the smaller man was brave and determined, and he didn't let his armored assailant get the better of him. So skilled was this seemingly overmatched hero, that he managed to surprise the black-clad figure with his ferocity, and the larger man lost his balance and fell over the edge of the platform upon which they had been battling.

The hero turned off his sword of light and went down after his armored enemy. Allie, awed by this titanic struggle, followed the sound of the hero's footsteps until she found the vent which led to where he had gone.

He was squared off against the armored one again, but this time the black cloaked figure didn't bother to duel his opponent. Instead, he began hurling heavy objects at his enemy using some sort of evil magic.

The young hero was stunned, and he stumbled backward toward a giant viewport. Bombarded from all sides, the hero did his best to deflect the projectiles. Finally, a heavy object careened into the hero, sending him flying through the glass viewport.

Allie gasped, a lump forming in her throat. Quickly, she scrambled to find out what had become of the fallen hero. Before long she found the right shaft and came to a grating which overlooked Cloud City's massive central wind tunnel. Far below, on a gantryway which lead across to a wing-shaped structure, lay the hero. Miraculously, he had survived the fall, and now he heaved himself up onto the catwalk and moved to the entrance of the wing-shaped structure.

Only a few moments passed before both figures emerged from the structure and battled their way out onto the gantry. The armored figure had somehow managed to get out into the wing-shaped structure ahead of the hero. The two battled fiercely, but the dark one seemed to have the upper hand. He pinned the hero down to the floor of the catwalk, but did not kill him. The hero seemed to sense this somehow, slashing out at the dark one's shoulder, which flashed a shower of sparks. Enraged by this, the evil one viciously slashed back at the hero, forcing him to the edge of the gantry, and striking a savage blow which took the hero's hand off in one, deadly slash!

The beaten hero backed away from his adversary, climbing out onto the edge of the gantry. He was sobbing now, and Allie cried with him. She heard the echoes of their words carry through the shaft.

"There is no escape," the dark one said, "Do not make me destroy you." But then his tone changed. He was trying to reason with the hero! "You do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the Galaxy."

Oh no, Allie thought, the dark one wants to corrupt the hero. But the hero answered, "I'll never join you!"

Allie missed portions of the exchange at this point, but her heart sank as the hero explained that the dark one killed his father.

Then another shock hit Allie and the hero at the same time. "No", said the dark one, "I am your father."

This was more than the hero could take. He leaned over the gantry and let himself drop. Allie could not see what ultimately happened to him, but the look on the hero's face just before his hopeless plunge somehow told Allie that he would be all right. The dark one watched his foe disappear into the recesses of the tunnel, and then turned, with a barely perceptible sigh.

As he began to stride from the gantry, the armored figure stopped in his tracks. Allie's heart began to race as he lifted his head and looked directly at her! Without hesitation, she bolted from the spot, running blindly, heading in a general direction of upward, regardless of the situation above. Anything was better than being caught by the dark one.

Eventually, she came to the upper plaza, running hard all the way, and never looking back for fear that the dark one would be right at her heels. Luckily, she ran directly into Bent

Gavler's trading post. Bent was a friend of the family and upon seeing the tattered little girl, swept her up into his arms and calmed her sobbing.

Allie, finally reunited with her family, left Bespin in a crowded transport. A common freighter passed by the viewport where she was sitting, and the sight of it somehow stopped her shivers and calmed the strange sensation that she was feeling. The hero was alive. She knew it.

The Price of Victory

Light Side Campaign: Scenario 4: City in the Clouds

You've arrived at the Rendezvous Point and you're included in a meeting of high-ranking Alliance officers. 'I overheard a coded message on the Tyrant,' says General Madine. 'With the help of slicers aboard the Champion, we've decoded it. The Tyrant received orders to move to Bespin and support an ambush of Rebel forces there.'

'We must find out the situation on Bespin as soon as possible,' says Wedge. Then he turns to you. 'Get to Cloud City and meet with one of our underground contacts. His name is Yoxgit.'

The next day finds you at Cloud City on Bespin, the floating facility originally built to service the tibanna gas mines of the planet. Disguising yourself as one of the locals, you descend into the lower levels of the city.

In a cantina filled with unruly Ugnaughts, you find your contact. He looks to be the leader of the gang. 'Yes, I am the one you seek,' he says in a whisper as he leans close. 'I was chosen because of my valuable community relations.' He waves his hand toward a table full of Ugnaughts nearby. They smile and raise their drinks.

'I was told that you were well paid for your loyalty,' you say. 'Tell me what you know about Imperial activity on Cloud City.'

'Here's what I can tell you,' says Yoxgit. 'I've looked at both sides of the situation, and I've decided that the Imperials will pay me even more credits when all you Rebels are killed! Get 'em, boys!'

The surviving members of Yoxgit's gang have run away. Their leader lies on the ground and cowers. 'I'll tell you what you want to know!' says Yoxgit. 'Don't kill me!'

You don't bother to pursue the rest of his gang as they escape into the dark streets below Cloud City.

Scenario 5: Hunting the Hunter

'Just put that blaster down! I'll tell you everything!' says the Ugnaught gang leader Yoxgit.

'I want to know about the Imperials,' you say. 'What are they doing on Cloud City? This is supposed to be an independent station.'

'It's the new administrator,' says the Ugnaught. 'Calrissian made a deal with Vader. He probably regrets it now! Anyway, one of your Rebels has been frozen in carbonite.'

'Frozen in carbonite? Who is it?' you say.

'I don't know why the Imperials are so interested in a Corellian smuggler,' says Yoxgit. 'His name is Solo. Han Solo.'

'He's a captain in the Alliance!' you say. 'We've got to rescue him. Where is he now?'

'A bounty hunter took possession of your frozen captain,' says the Ugnaught. 'Name is Boba Fett. You'd better hurry, he's making his getaway right now.'

They say Fett is the best bounty hunter in the galaxy. If he's working for the Empire, then the whole Rebel Alliance is threatened. You head for the landing pad and see a Firespray attack craft there. It's Boba Fett's Slave I, his personal starship. The carbonite slab containing Solo's frozen body is moving towards the loading ramp, hovering on repulsors and escorted by stormtroopers. The swirl of a cape follows, revealing Boba Fett in full battle armor.

'Stop right there, Fett!' you say. 'You're not taking Solo anywhere!'

'He's mine now!' says Fett. 'He's worth a lot to me, and you're not going to slow me down.'

Fett's jetpack ignites and as he rises, he fires his blaster. Boba Fett is a formidable enemy. Aided by a squad of Imperial stormtroopers, he holds off your attack. When the Imperials are finally defeated, Fett makes good his escape, taking the frozen carbonite body of Han Solo aboard Slave I. All you can do is watch helplessly while his ship rises from the docking pad and then blasts away into space.

'That's what the Imps were up to on Cloud City then,' says Wedge over the comlink. 'Now we know that Fett has Captain Solo, we can get started on a plan to rescue him. You've been an asset to the Alliance. Return to the Rendezvous Point. We have an officer's commission waiting for you. There's a lot of work still to be done if we're going to defeat the Empire.'

The Price Of Victory

Dark Side Campaign: Scenario 5: Covering the Extraction

Lobot and his Cloud City policemen have surrendered to your squad of stormtroopers. The chief of security seems willing to cooperate in exchange for his life.

'I know the Rebels were meeting with an Ugnaught gang,' you say. 'Where are they now? What are their plans? As Calrissian's top aide, you must know.'

Lobot nods at his one of his Wing Guard. 'We're tracking the Rebels, as ordered by Lord Vader,' he says. Then he looks at a datapad. 'They're making their way toward landing pad 327. That's where the bounty hunter is taking the prisoner.'

'What prisoner?' you ask. 'Who is the bounty hunter?'

'Boba Fett has made a deal with Darth Vader to collect a bounty on a Rebel captain,' says the corporal. 'The Ugnaughts froze Han Solo in carbonite. The Rebels must be going there to stop Fett and rescue Solo.'

'Than that's where we're headed,' you say.

The stream of panicked citizens throughout the streets of Cloud City lessens as more of them evacuate. When you approach the landing pad, you see a Firespray attack craft which must be Boba Fett's Slave I.

The famous bounty hunter blasts into the sky with his jetpack. Nearby, stormtroopers carry the carbonite frozen body of Han Solo on repulsorlifts. A group of Rebel commandos open fire on Fett. Lord Vader wants Fett to take this prisoner, so it's your job to stop the Rebels from rescuing Han Solo.

The Rebels are forced to fall back. Wedge rallies them to escape to another landing pad, but that's not your concern. Stormtroopers load the body of Captain Solo aboard Slave I. As Boba Fett strides up the landing ramp, he stops for a moment to nod your way with a small

salute. Soon, the sublight engines of Slave I roar to life. The starship lifts off from Cloud City and blasts away into the clouds of Bespin.

A shuttle takes you aboard the orbiting Tyrant once again. 'You dispatched the Jedi and stopped the Rebels from interfering with Lord Vader's deal,' says Captain Lennox in your debriefing. 'This is good work. I'm sure the Empire will soon have another assignment worthy of your many talents.'

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Clone B-2332-54

Smelting Core D on Cloud City was one of the city's most efficient metal reclamation centers; Groggin, the Ugnaught in charge of this particular smelting core, always saw to that. Anything that could be melted down and reprocessed was shoved through the huge furnace that he kept running day and night. Droid parts, broken computers, metal food storage canisters and bulkhead fittings all rolled down the rumbling conveyor to be boiled down into base metals or usable alloys.

An unusual item amidst the clutter caught Groggin's squinting eye. Reaching into the stream of debris rolling past him, he deftly picked out the peculiar piece of rubbish that had caught his attention.



With a grunt of surprise, he turned over the cauterized stump of a Human hand, which was still clutching a strange metal cylinder. Checking the lot number, he saw that the hand had come from the lower air shafts. Apparently, the unusual piece of rubbish had been retrieved by the drones that kept the network of air shafts and pipes free of debris. *Now how in the worlds did this get down there*, the Ugnaught thought. *No matter. The metal is all that matters.*

Moving back to the conveyer, Groggin intended to incinerate the discarded hand and melt the odd metal cylinder down. Then, he heard the odd, mechanical hissing behind him. Turning, the short, stocky Ugnaught faced the two-meter tall, black-robed figure in the doorway. The menacing figure gestured to Groggin.

"The hand. Give it to me," demanded the armored giant, his voice echoing eerily around the room.

Groggin, completely ignorant of galactic affairs, did not realize just who it was he was addressing. He immediately demanded 2,000 credits. "Got to cover

costs, old boy," he grunted. "Though I've a feeling we could arrange a trade. The metal in that helmet could be useful. Not worth much, but still ..."

Lord Darth Vader, unused to such blatant disrespect, was actually taken aback, but only for a moment. "You will give me the hand. And the lightsaber. *Now*," he growled menacingly, emphasizing the dire threat implicit in each word.

"Now see here ..." began Groggin, but his voice trailed off in a muffled gag. With a flick of Vader's gauntleted wrist, the severed hand, still clutching the deactivated lightsaber in its grasp, floated to the Dark Lord of the Sith.

The other Ugnaughts in the room immediately

swarmed to their leader, trying to find the cause of his mysterious coughing fit. The impertinent engineer was dead before they ever reached him. And later, they would swear that — if it was at all possible to tell — the evil Dark Lord radiated black pleasure. "Another trophy for the Emperor's vaults," Vader boomed. Turning on his heel, Darth Vader left the smelting chamber — and its dead master — behind him.

Boarding his shuttle, he ordered the pilot to

lift off. *A pity, my son*, he thought. *You could have joined me and together ... we could have destroyed the Emperor and ruled the galaxy in his place.*

As he stared at the severed appendage in his hands, a sudden flash of insight struck the Dark Lord, realization dawning like the sunrise of Bespin. *Perhaps, if you will not be turned, little Jedi, a suitable substitute may be arranged.*

Suddenly, Vader was struck to his knees by the horribly powerful voice that rolled like fiery thunder through his brain. The pilots struggled vainly to ignore the Dark Lord's ... discomfort. "Yes, my servant," the voice boomed in his mind, dripping raw evil. "Come to Mount Tantiss, immediately. I shall meet you there, and we will discuss *my* new trophy."

"Yes ... my Master," Vader gasped, feeling an icy stab of dread in his soul, as the Emperor's mocking chuckle still echoed in his mind. His Master had detected his rebellious thoughts. This discussion would be most unpleasant. Most unpleasant indeed.

Fleet Smashes Rebels on Hoth

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: In a stunning announcement, Imperial Advisor Alec Pradeux released information about a massive victory against a Rebel Alliance stronghold in the Outer Rim Territories. "After several months of meticulous searching, Lord Vader's Death Squadron discovered and annihilated a key Rebel fortress on an ice planet called Hoth," Pradeux said. "This is indeed a great triumph for the Emperor in restoring order to a galaxy ravaged by the terrorist Rebellion."

Pradeux outlined the major points of the battle. After discovering the base, the Death Squadron jumped to Hoth. As soon as the fleet emerged from hyperspace, the Rebels raised a protective shield around their citadel, preventing the squadron's Star Destroyers—including the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*—from bombarding the planet with turbolaser fire and TIE bomber concussion missiles.

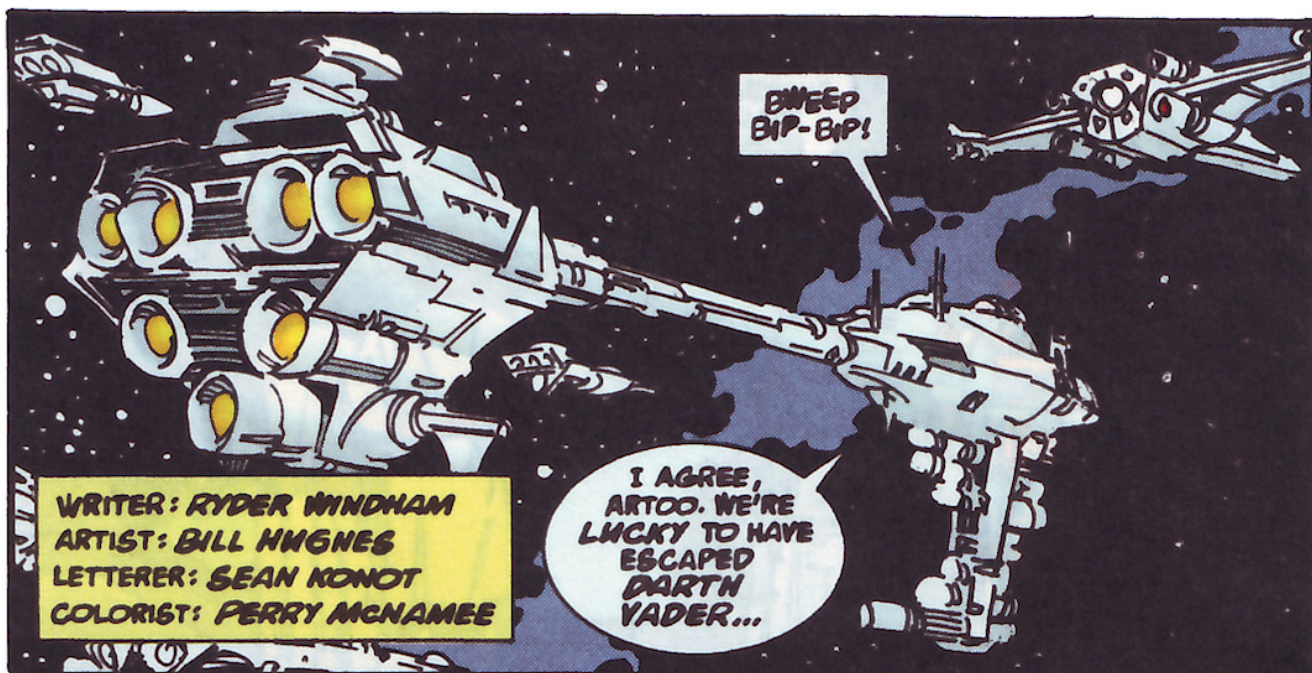
A detachment of AT-ATs and Imperial snowtroopers was deployed to Hoth's surface to enter the Rebel-held territory beneath the edges of the planetary shield. General Veers led the desperate AT-AT charge directly at the main Alliance strongpoint. Veers had been serving in the Imperial garrison on Corellia before transfer to the Lord Vader's flagship as commander of ground forces. His determination and tactical skills helped deal a crushing blow against enemy forces. Veers's AT-AT units managed to withstand continued assaults from well-armed Rebel airspeeders, powerful gunnery installations and columns of elite Alliance troops. After destroying the shield generator, Veers led his snowtroopers through the Rebel fortress, eradicating any resistance and gathering vital intelligence about Alliance activities throughout the region.

Among the numerous Imperial casualties was Admiral Ozzel, commander of the Super Star Destroyer *Executor* and leader of the Death Squadron Fleet. Ozzel was killed when the Rebels pummeled the Admiral's vessel with salvos from a powerful energy weapon on Hoth's surface. The blasts disabled the *Executor* for only a few moments—long enough for several Rebel ships to slip past the Imperial blockade and jump to hyperspace. Imperial snowtroopers later penetrated and destroyed the weapon after a daring and costly assault against the massive gun emplacement.

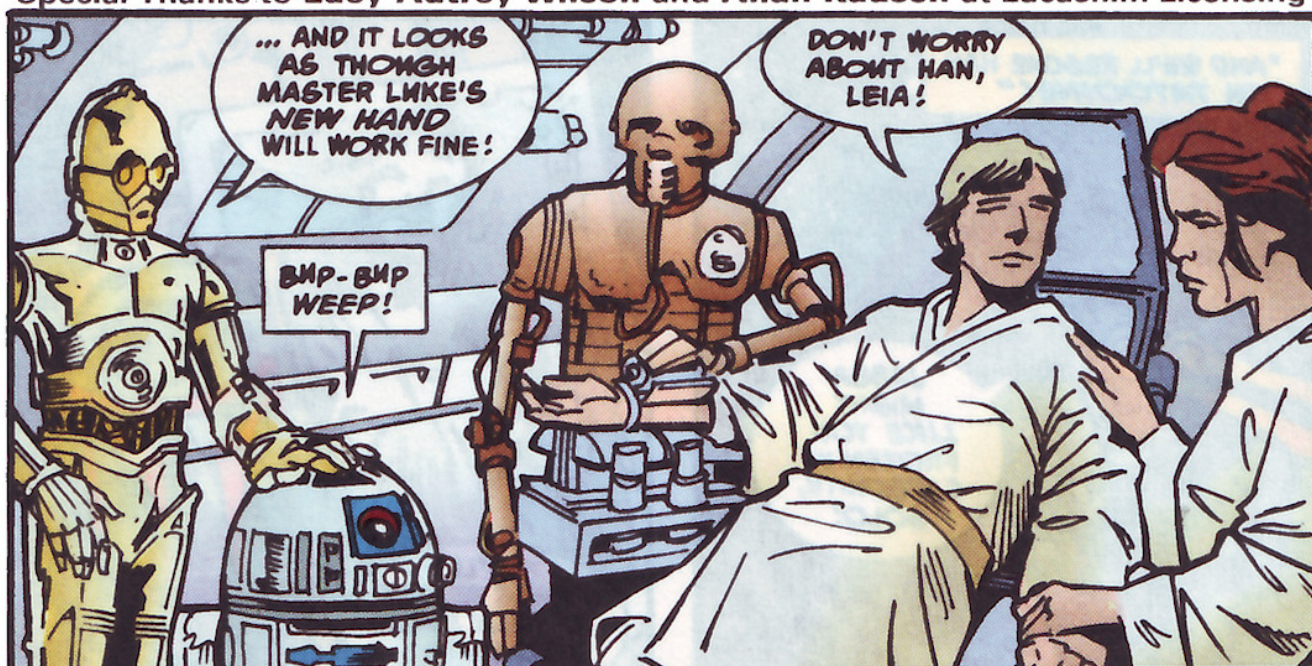
Ozzel's remains will be returned to his homeworld of Corulag, where ceremonies honoring the Admiral are planned at the Corulag Academy. Ozzel's first officer, Captain Piett, was awarded a field promotion to take the Admiral's place as military commander of the Death Squadron and captain of the *Executor*.

With the Hoth base destroyed, the Imperial Fleet is planning to deploy in pursuit of the numerous fleeing Rebel craft. Piett hopes to prevent these fugitive elements from finding shelter and establishing other secret Alliance posts throughout the Outer Rim.

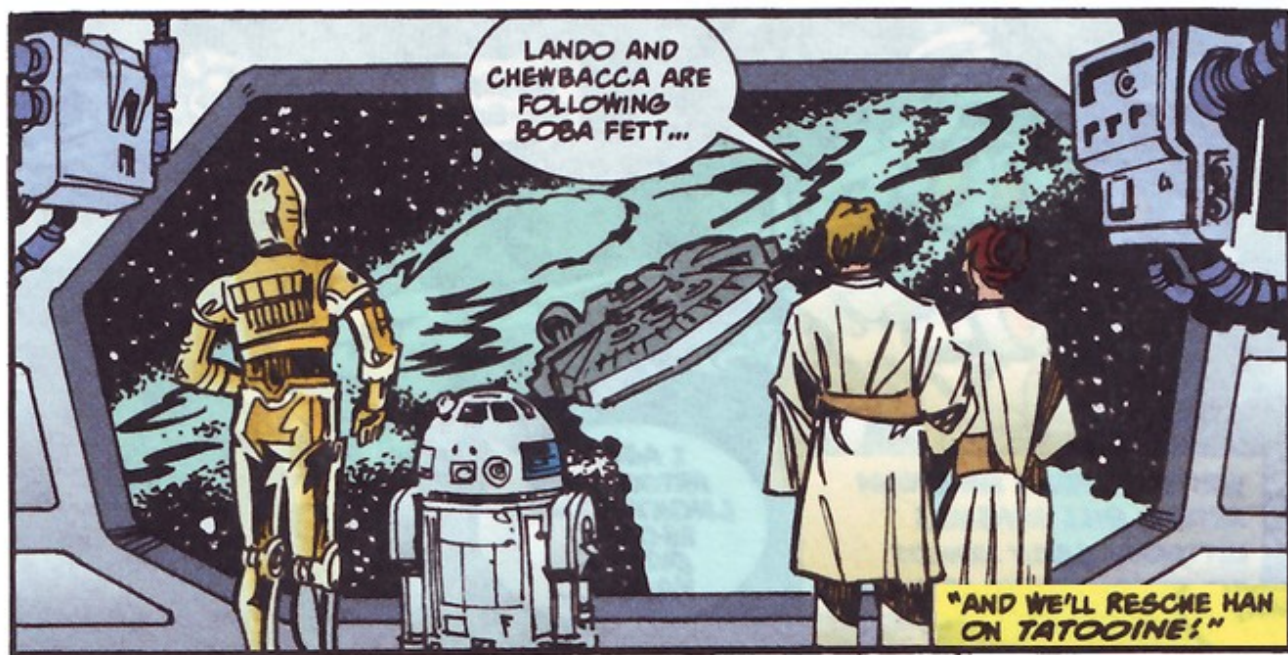
Newsnet reporters were not allowed direct contact with the fleet. No communications with the Death Squadron are allowed except at the highest levels and through the most secure channels. Imperial HoloVision will continue to cover the Empire's successful campaign against the Rebel terrorists until peace and order are established once again.



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It is a Dark Time

To: Arhul Hextrophon

From: Voren Na'al

Regarding: Yavin Report Continuation

As I sit here on the observation deck of the medical frigate, watching the tiny speck that is the *Millennium Falcon* disappear into the vastness of space, I am overtaken by a newfound clarity of understanding and perspective concerning the events on which this report is based.

This is a result of the somewhat false security provided by the surrounding Rebel fleet. Or perhaps, this is the first time I can actually look back on these events and truly feel that they have run their course. But the image of the *Falcon* and its crew departing on a quest to rescue their captured, carbon-frozen captain should demonstrate that it's not over yet.

Why, then, do I feel a certain sense of completeness at this moment? Perhaps it is the end, not of the story itself, which continues onward at breakneck pace, but of an important phase of that story. A phase in which the Empire, having suffered its most humiliating defeat, has rebounded to deal the Rebellion a seemingly devastating blow.

This blow is devastating not merely for its effect on the endless quest for a permanent Alliance base, or for the tremendous loss of life and resources in that fateful battle on the icy plains of Hoth. It is most devastating for its effect on the great Rebel heroes, and consequently on the very morale of the Alliance itself. For those heroes are the meterstick with which the tide of this bloody, galactic conflict is measured. Somehow, the fates of these brave few seem to mirror the fate of the Rebellion itself. When the heroes are most triumphant, the Alliance shares their triumph. But when they are defeated and distraught, the flame of rebellion in the galaxy threatens to be extinguished forever.

And so, if I were to characterize this most recent phase of our continuing story, I would have to paint a dark picture. We have reached what seems to be our lowest ebb, and what was once a rising tide has faded into the harmless rippling of an almost stagnant pool. I do not know, however, if the Empire perceives recent events in this way. Is it experiencing the triumph of driving us from Hoth and defeating our greatest heroes, or is it frustrated at letting us get away? More likely, it is the latter that is felt by the Empire.

It is here that we should look to for inspiration. The Emperor and his evil servants had us right where they wanted us and yet, we still managed to escape. It is failure that the Empire has experienced, not victory. The destruction of the Death Star must be viewed as an anomaly, carried out only in our self-defense. At this point in the brief history of the Alliance, our plan should not be aggression, but self preservation, and therefore we did succeed at Hoth. We managed to slip between the fingers of the Empire's clenching fist, and in so doing, we have been able to keep the hope of freedom in the galaxy alive for a while longer.

What can be said of the Alliance can, as I have mentioned, be said of its greatest heroes. They have not been defeated, but rather they have triumphed, simply by remaining alive when faced with certain death, time and time again. And although I have said these latest adventures are a dark time for the Rebellion, I must also point out that darkness is merely the absence of light. In this case, that light has not been completely extinguished. Therefore, it can only grow brighter once again, to fill the darkest corners of the galaxy with its dazzling brilliance.



IL POTERE DELLA FORZA

STAR WARS

THE POWER OF THE FORCE

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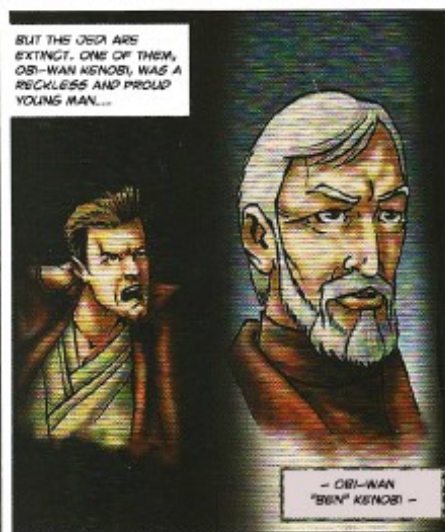
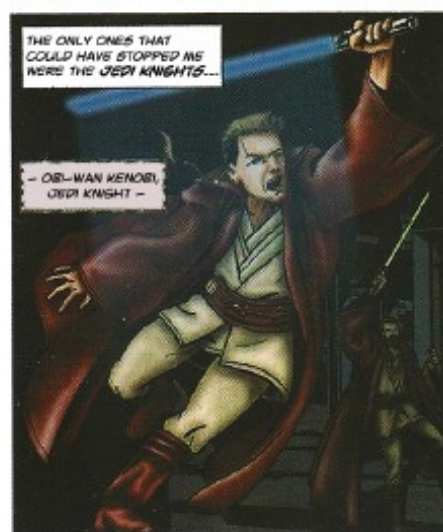
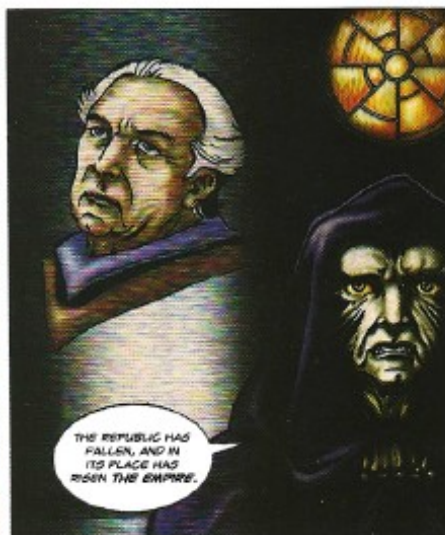
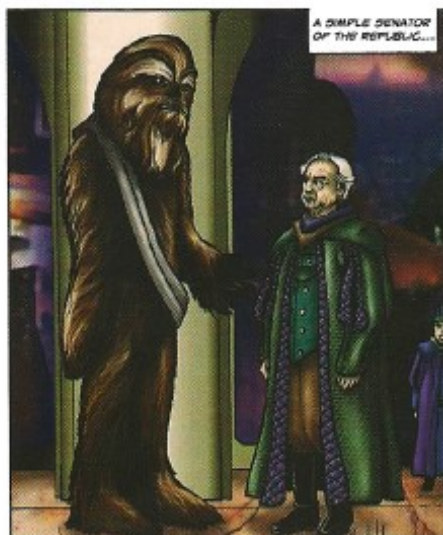
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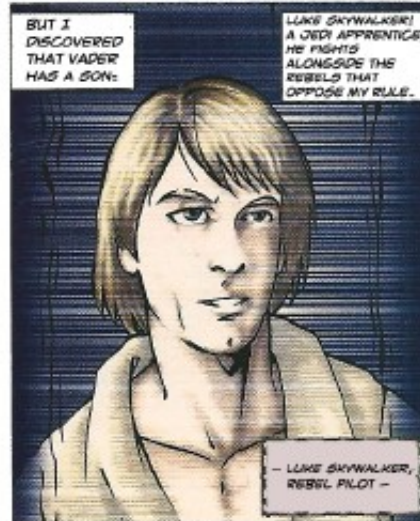


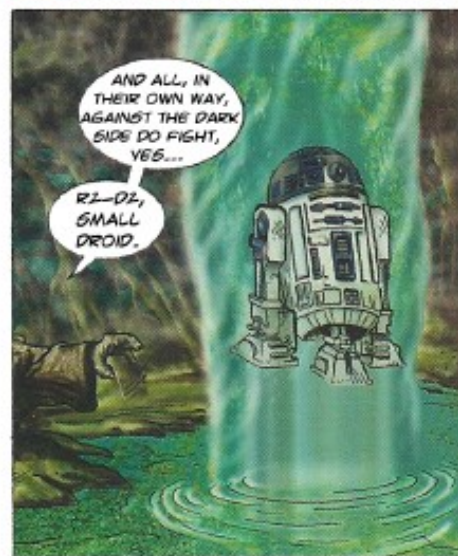
SEDUCED BY THE DARK
SIDE OF THE FORCE,
HE BETRAYED HIS
MASTER, OBI-WAN
KENobi, AND NOW ...
HE SERVES ME!

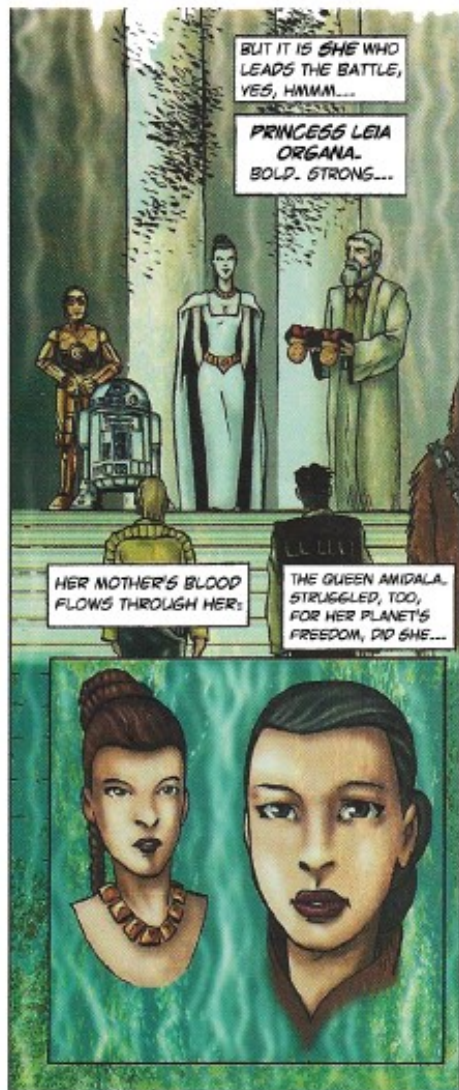


BUT I
DISCOVERED
THAT VADER
HAS A SON:

LUKE SKYWALKER!
A JEDI APPRENTICE,
HE FIGHTS
ALONGSIDE THE
REBELS THAT
OPPOSE MY RULE.









"No matter where you go, or how far from the Galactic Core you end up, it'll always find you." These were Lando's expressed feelings when asked about finally joining the fight for freedom.

"I guess I was just kidding myself," he continued, "thinking I could run away and hide from trouble when all I was really doing was not dealing with how I felt about everything. I have never had a love for the Empire, and I always felt I had been doing my part to fight it — in my own little annoying kind of way."

Calrissian's roguish smile faded as he finished his statement, "When I settled on Bespin, it seemed that everything I was doing was for myself. Everything that's happened lately has been a test. Normally, I have my own special way of dealing with tests, but I couldn't find one of those ways that would apply this time. There was just no way to cheat. It was a 'true or false' kind of question, with no 'all or none of the above' options. So, I guess you might say I tried one answer, and found that I wasn't too happy with it, so I deleted that answer and chose another path of action."

Droids Can't Fly

"Don't touch that, Artoo! Captain Solo might be frozen in carbonite, but that doesn't give you permission to twiddle with his ship."

The barrel-shaped astromech unit beeped at his human/cyborg relations counterpart, then rolled himself toward the *Millennium Falcon's* cockpit.

"Where are you going?" Threepio protested. "You have no business going up there. Everyone knows droids can't fly, silly. Come back here at once, you arrogant little..."

Threepio's insults were drowned out by a crass series of whistles and razzes from Artoo.

"Why, how dare you call me such things! Your insolence is astounding, Artoo... wait for me!"

Threepio tottered through the corridor leading to the *Falcon's* cockpit, where he found Artoo jacked into the starship's computer. Through the cockpit viewport, he could see ships of the Rebel fleet cruising by -- Nebulon-B frigates, Gallofree Yards medium transports, and

X-wing and Y-wing starfighters on patrol. Try as he might, craning his stiff droid neck, Threepio could not see much of the medical frigate's hull to which they were moored.

Artoo beeped again, rotating his domed head to glare at Threepio.

"I don't care what you've found," he said. "You've no business mucking about with the *Millennium Falcon*. Why, if Master Luke found out, he'd have a conniption. And if Captain Solo were here, he'd surely blast you into a thousand pieces. You know how he is about others tampering with his starship. Why, on Bespin he continually expressed that concern to --"

Artoo turned his head from Threepio, then beeped a response.

"What do you mean you could fly the *Falcon* just as well as Captain Solo? You're nothing more than an astromech droid. You can't even maneuver Master Luke's X-wing without knocking over some poor, unsuspecting bystander. What delusions of grandeur have you been dreaming up in that rusty processor of yours?"

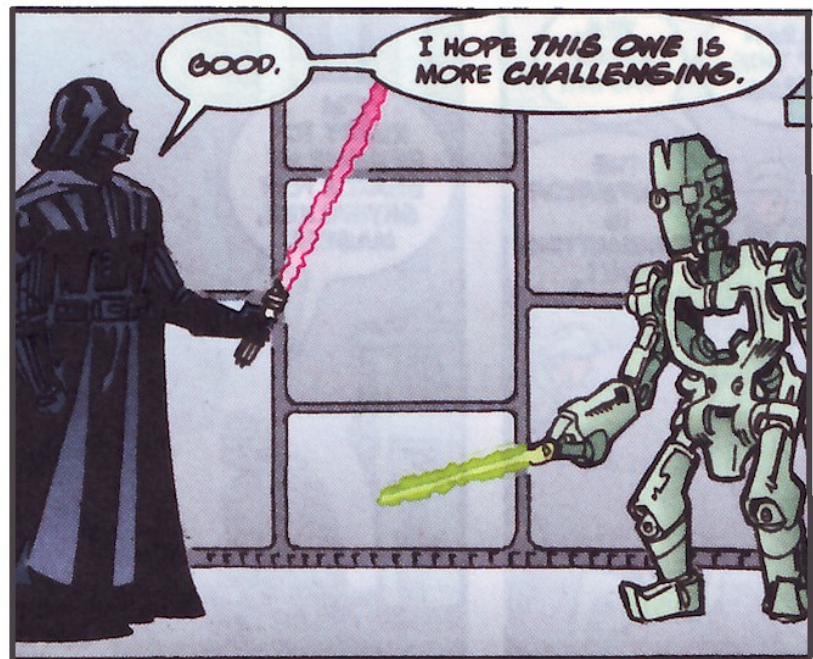
The series of whistles and electronic moans from Artoo didn't seem to answer Threepio's question. Then the little droid disengaged its I/O jack from the *Falcon*'s computer, rolled aside and bumped against Threepio, knocking the protocol droid into the co-pilot's command chair. Artoo emitted a series of amused beeps.

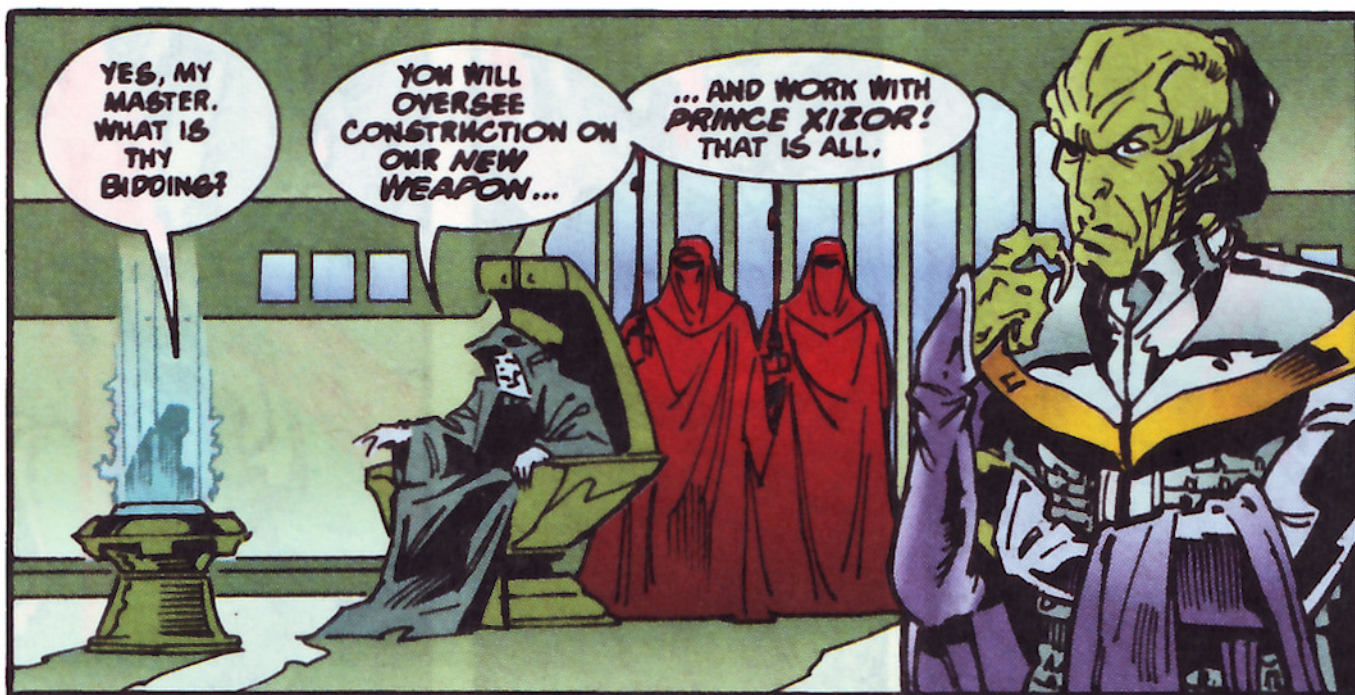
"What do you mean, now I'm your co-pilot?" Threepio sputtered. "I don't know any more about flying this stars hip than you do. You know how much I abhor space travel."

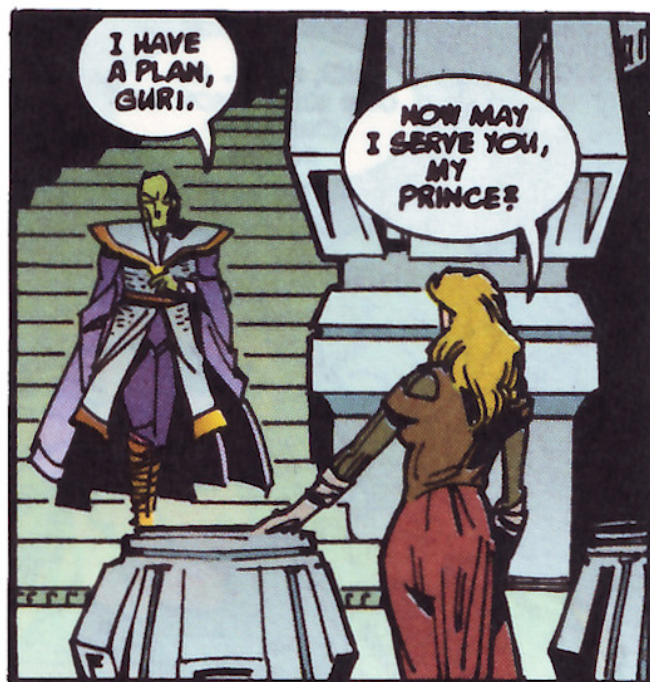
There was a questioning Wookiee growl from the Falcon's docking hatch. "Come away from there, Artoo," Threepio whispered as he stiffly rose from the co-pilot's seat. "We have no business here. And besides, it would take a lot more than two droids to competently pilot this starship. With you in command, we'd be certain to end up crashed against some star cruiser, or worse yet, flying through some starport building."

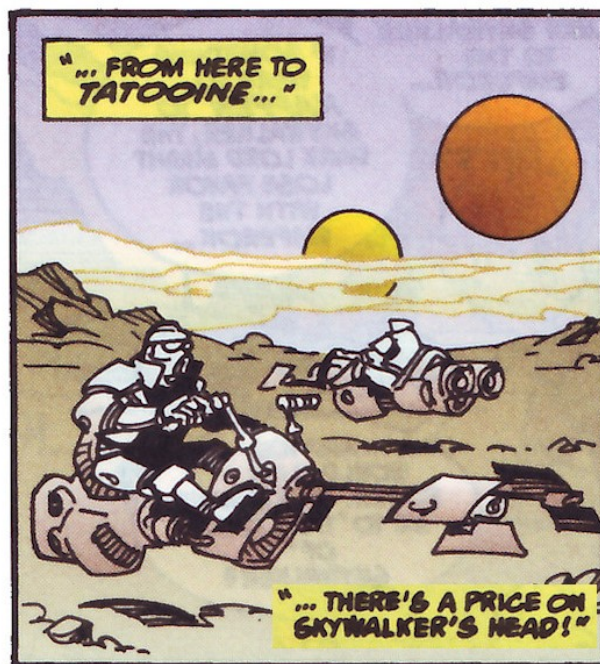
Chewbacca poked his head in the cockpit and growled at the droids.

"Oh, Chewbacca, no, we were just completing a maintenance check to be sure the *Falcon* was in working order," Threepio bluffed. He tottered past the towering Wookiee. "Come along, Artoo. We'd better see how Master Luke is faring. He didn't look too good after our last adventures on Cloud City. I certainly hope his current condition was not the result of your rash actions in abandoning him..."









The Emperor's Trophy

Darth Vader calms himself. The Imperial shuttle slows for the approach to the Emperor's fortress at Mount Tantiss. The Dark Lord does not fear the impending audience with his master. He knows that failure never casts a favorable light on anyone. Vader himself has ruthlessly punished the failings of his subordinates. But the Emperor is more concerned with news of Luke Skywalker, not with berating his minions. No, Vader is not afraid to account for his actions. He fears what it is that he's delivering to Palpatine.

It has only been a few days since the young Jedi escaped his carefully planned trap in Cloud City. Vader knows the Emperor is aware of his inability to seduce Skywalker to the dark side. His master seems to be satisfied knowing Vader has taught the impatient Jedi a lesson in anger and fear. The Dark Lord has been summoned to Wayland - - far from the prying eyes of the Core Worlds - - to present the trophy of his battle with young Skywalker.

The shuttle wings fold upward as the vessel eases into a docking bay carved in the mountain. The transport box next to Vader is not large, yet he can already feel its weight. His master waits to take possession of what is inside. The shadows behind Vader stir, betraying the two Noghri hiding there. Kohvrekhar and his clan-brother Ghazhak had located the trophy and helped Vader recover it. While the Dark Lord rushed back to his Super Star Destroyer to await the young Jedi's capture, the Noghri combed the depths of Cloud City for what had once belonged to Skywalker. After Luke evaded Imperial forces with the help of his friends, Vader returned to Bespin to personally retrieve the Emperor's prize. His Noghri honor guard discovered it with a horde of Ugnaughts in one of the mining facility's deeper smelting cores. The crude beasts were going to discard the flesh and melt the shaft of metal into scrap. Vader had "discouraged" them from doing so and took possession of the items himself. The Emperor commanded him to bring them immediately to the Mount Tantiss stronghold on Wayland. To return these items to the Emperor will be a display of loyalty. His master seems to regard them as his own possessions which had long ago been stolen.

The boarding ramp lowers with a hiss and Darth Vader strides down. The transport box is neatly cradled in one arm. To anyone else the case would be light, but to Vader it is weighted down with fear, memory and regret.

Although he does not see them, Vader knows his Noghri honor guard are nearby. They have slipped through the shuttle's venting steam, then merged with the docking bay shadows. Several staff members had been waiting for the shuttle's arrival. They had showered him with pleasantries and respectful words tinged with fear. The paltry reception party of low-ranking officers does not concern him - - Vader walks past them, ignoring the leader's message that the Emperor wishes to see him immediately. He marches into the waiting turbolift, his Noghri escort fading into the darkness behind him.

The box grows heavier as the turbolift rises toward the Emperor's throne room complex. No honor guard can protect him from the feelings the box's contents stir within him.

The turbolift door slides open, revealing a vast holographic display of the galaxy. The Dark Lord pauses to gaze at the map. For a moment he wonders where Skywalker is now hiding in that swirling mass of star systems.

Vader steps out along the walkway and approaches his master. Guards attend to matters at two platform control consoles flanking a stairway. The steps lead up to the throne from the wide balcony, offering the Emperor a grand vista of his holographic domain.

The Emperor's voice is a weak sneer cackling across the room. "Leave your servants behind, Lord Vader. This business does not concern them." Two Royal Guards hover menacingly on each side of the Emperor's throne. For a split second, the Dark Lord secretly wonders if they would be any match for his alien escorts. Just as quickly, he brushes the thought from his mind - - he could never betray his master. Vader raises a hand, and the Noghri retreat, leaving their liege alone with the Emperor.

Vader ascends the stairs, then kneels before his master. "Rise, my friend," the Emperor croaks. "Tell me of your contest with young Skywalker." Vader explains his intricate plan to lure Skywalker to Cloud City by tormenting his friends. It had not been a successful encounter for either of them. Finally, with the help of his Rebel companions, Skywalker had managed to escape. Still, Luke had suffered a great defeat - - the loss of his right hand.

"I have already reviewed Admiral Piett's report of your activities on Bespin," the Emperor says. "It is unfortunate you did not snare the young Jedi. His powers have grown, indeed. Perhaps he might someday match your abilities, my friend. Still, you managed to wound him and infect him with fear. This can only be to our advantage during your next confrontation."

The Emperor watches Vader for a moment, his eyes lingering on the box. His whispering voice sounds distant, almost dreamy with anticipation. "I see you have brought me what Skywalker lost..."

Vader hands the box to a royal guard, who passes it to the Emperor's waiting grasp. Palpatine opens it, revealing a hand and a Jedi's lightsaber. The lightsaber is the blue-bladed weapon Luke had wielded in his confrontation with Vader on Bespin. The hand is Luke's, the one Vader had severed in anger after Skywalker's lightsaber had cleaved into his own shoulder.

The items, while welcomed by the Emperor, are far more significant to Vader. For the weapon had once belonged to another Jedi, Skywalker's father. And the hand... was it of the same flesh and blood that once ran through the father's veins? Was Anakin Skywalker truly dead?

Vader senses a familiar twinge as he looks at the weapon again. The sight of the hand, too, elicits and eerie recognition. Vader almost feels as if he is surrendering his own hand. Electricity twitches within the Dark Lord's right gauntlet. He suppresses an urge to flex it. Instead, he masks his emotions and does not make any gesture that might reveal his true feelings.

The contents of the box may have once been part of him. Now they are the Emperor's.

"These will have a place of honor in my personal collection," the Emperor muses, entranced by the intricacies of the dead flesh and the well-worn lightsaber.

"The young Jedi is weak and beaten," Vader replies, trying to turn the conversation. "He will be vulnerable to attack."

"Yes, I sense that you wish to continue your hunt for Skywalker. But do not worry about him for now. I have foreseen his fate... the time is not yet come for him to join us. For now, you are to return to Imperial Center. We have other concerns to attend to...."

Vader takes the Emperor's cue, and subdues his feelings by thinking of his impending duties and schemes. In addition to overseeing the Emperor's new construction project, Vader has pressing matters to take up with a powerful - - and potentially dangerous Falleen prince named Xizor.

There will be plenty of time later to deal with Luke Skywalker.

Temporary Reassignment

Admiral Piett stood before Darth Vader in the Dark Lord's chambers aboard the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*. He had an uneasy feeling this discussion would be very brief-and probably fatal -given his failure to capture the *Millennium Falcon* at Bespin.

He had been at Admiral Ozzel's side when the Dark Lord made clear his wrath for that officer's error on Hoth. Later, he had watched the guards drag away Captain Needa's lifeless body after his failed "apology." Vader did not tolerate anything but exemplary performance from those in his service, and Piett had failed him.

"Admiral Piett," Vader said, the booming voice echoing through the chamber. "I have been recalled to Coruscant to make my report to the Emperor. The *Executor* shall accompany me under the command of Captain Kallie."

Piett felt his throat tense - was it the Dark Lord's work, or his own apprehension?

Vader continued. "You shall remain in command of the Imperial fleet to continue the hunt for the Rebels. You shall carry the flag aboard the Star Destroyer *Accuser*."

"Yes, my lord," Piett said, stifling his sigh of relief.

"You will be reassigned to the *Executor* when I return from my duties at the Imperial Court." Vader glared at the Admiral. "I am entrusting the fleet to you, Admiral Piett. Do not permit yourself any failures - if any come to my attention, be assured a new admiral will be placed in charge of this fleet."

Piett understood completely. "Yes, Lord Vader."

He did not release his sigh of relief until he was well away from the Dark Lord's chambers.

BOOSTER SHOT

'I deal in information,' says Talon Karrde. You are meeting with him at a cantina on Corellia. You know that Karrde is a smuggler and that he deals with the Rebel Alliance. The Empire certainly has warrants out for his arrest, but you're here to find employment.

'Sometimes in my dealings,' says Karrde, 'I encounter a businessman named Booster Terrik.' Karrde takes a moment to calm himself. It doesn't work. 'That no-good, double-dealing swindler needs to be taught a lesson!' He pounds his fist on the table. 'Sorry,' he says, composing himself again. 'Just find Terrik. Rough him up. Tell him Karrde sent you. Tell him to stay out of my business.'

Booster and his daughter Mirax live on a refueling station that orbits Corellia. You secure passage on a freighter, and when it docks at the station, you jump ship. Finding Terrik's office, you watch it an hour and wait for his employees to leave. Then it's time to go to work.

As you enter, a young woman carrying a hydrosponder bumps into you. 'Sorry. We're closed,' she says.

'You must be Mirax,' you say, arming yourself.

She backs into the office, a wary look on her face. 'Father?' she asks, without turning around. 'We have company.' You hear banging noises from the inner office and the large figure of Booster Terrik enters.

'What kind of moron shows up at this hour...' he stops as he sees you. 'Who are you?' he asks.

'Never mind that. I've got a message from Talon Karrde. Stay out of his business.'

Terrik laughs a big laugh. 'Karrde? That small-timer? He gets no respect from me.'

You point your weapon at Terrik and say, 'Then I'll have to teach you some respect'

It's an intense firefight with the gundark-sized Terrik, but eventually he falls unconscious. 'Message delivered,' you think to yourself. Just to be clear, you bash in a few data terminals before leaving.

When you tell the whole story to Karrde, he is pleased. 'That ought to get his attention,' says the information broker. 'Good work. Now, make yourself scarce. I'm sure Terrik's associates will be looking for you.'

X-Wing: Alliance

The Azzameen family business, Twin Suns Transport Services, was never the same after the narrow escape from Hoth. Family patriarch Tomaas Azzameen was nearly killed during the escape.

I know. I was right there beside him.

I had just undergone some minor software and hardware adjustments when the Imperials attacked Hoth. Tomaas and Galin, the eldest son, grabbed what belongings and supplies they could and launched with the first wave. Fortunately, I was already onboard the transport when they took off. I am not insinuating they would have left me behind, but amidst confusion and chaos humans can make terrible mistakes.

Not long after the escape, Azzameen family headquarters began getting reports of pirate raids and hijackings. Shipping companies reported regular attacks by mercenaries and suffered heavy financial losses. A few went out of business.

Once I analyzed all the attack report data, I uncovered some interesting facts: the shipping companies that *did not* report losses were closely associated with the Empire. It does not take a dual-linked analyzer circuit to figure out what that means! At the top of the suspect list was Viraxo Industries. This shipping conglomerate had increased profits by 75 percent! Need I say more?

This fact did not elude the Azzameens, which is commendable. The Viraxos always have been connected to Azzameen problems in some way. It was common knowledge they had sworn to dominate the shipping lanes of the entire galaxy—no doubt with the Empire's help.

The Empire ... my circuits overheat when I recall the horrible things attributed to them. The whole galaxy was enveloped in a tremendous struggle for survival and freedom from the grip of the Empire. Oh, it was a difficult and dangerous period, indeed.

Had it not been for this galactic turmoil, however, I might never have become associated with the youngest Azzameen sibling—Ace. After I was assigned to him, the real adventures began

The Stele Chronicles

Prologue

...elsewhere, battles have been fought. The great Death Star - destroyed, The Rebel Alliance - with Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker Han Solo, Chewbacca the Wookiee - has celebrated its first major victory against the Empire.

The Emperor and his chief vassal. Lord Darth Vader, plot to expand the Empire's power and to wipe out the Rebels, In the Hoth system, the Empire strikes back. Discovering the Rebels' base on the ice planet, the Empire attacks in force and the Rebels are forced to evacuate.

But the Galaxy is vast, and news sometimes travels slowly. Even slower are the winds of conquest which blow from the center of civilization to the outer edges of what is known as the Rim.

In the Taroon system, two small worlds engage in a decades-long conquest. Few people bother to recite the original causes of the war. It simply exists, ravaging the cities and the countryside. The economies of both Kuan and Bordal are in ruins, their people living under martial law. Systems like Taroon are ripe for conquest; ready to welcome the iron hand of the Empire...

The Stunt

The swoop flew low over the ravaged landscape, hugging the shattered rooftops. Small tornadoes of dust and debris sprang up to mark its passage. The pilot did not notice the destruction, the rooftops, or the dust. He had seen it all before. His eyes were riveted ahead, his hands gripped the sticks, and his mouth clenched tight. The swoop flew toward an eerie landscape of high-rise buildings - once a great metropolitan center. Now, after nearly twenty years of interplanetary warfare, they were (mostly) empty shells. The swoop sped toward them.

At the last instant, the pilot twisted the sticks to the side and worked the pedal controls. The swoop twisted and turned, snaked its way through the maze of twisted girders and blown-out windows. A blaster shot rang out - close - but the pilot continued his weaving course without hesitation. There were always snipers, but they only added to the excitement.

Up ahead, the piece de resistance, the ultimate flythrough. The pilot's eyes narrowed, searching for the opening. There it was! The great doors, partially torn from their mountings, hung to the side like the wings of some tortured moth. Beyond, the cavernous interior - empty, dark, and dead.

He angled downward, flattening his approach at the last minute, and blasted past the broken wings, through the great opening that only just accommodated the swoop . . . into the building. He hadn't counted on the sudden change of illumination - the darkness. Blinded, he kept the swoop on a steady course. He had less than two seconds before he'd have to maneuver again. One and . . . Too late. He'd have to begin his turn. He pulled hard against the counter force of the sticks, jerking his swoop in an impossible loop. He'd rehearsed this in his mind so many times. He could do it!

The G forces slammed him against the seat, and the sticks jerked and tried to pull free - to follow the path of least resistance - but he kept his grip on the sloop, willing it around, imagining the walls and ceiling - feeling their presence in his mind. If he slammed into one of them . . .

He could see again, but it hardly mattered now. The sloop was inverted and he hung on with his knees, not trusting the safety belt. The sloop hit the ceiling of the cavernous room - not too hard - then bounced slightly with a scraping sound that echoed over the engine roar. There were bright sparks that died quickly, and great chunks of ceiling that fell in slow motion toward the floor below.

The pilot held his breath and pushed forward on the sticks, then twisted hard to the side. The sloop steadied, twisted in the air, and was headed once again for the great doorway it had come through. He had done it! He had executed a near-perfect stunt. Far away, he knew, the collected voices of the audience would be gasping and yelling, He had only to make it through the doorway and he was home free.

Suddenly, a miscalculation - very slight - as the sloop edged through the great opening. Something was wrong with the stabilizer nozzles - probably damaged in the collision with the ceiling. The sloop hit the side of the entrance with a sickening crunch, careened sideways a moment, then began to spin. The pilot did not panic. By instinct, he corrected the spin and let the sloop slide sideways toward the wall of a nearby building. Then he accelerated, poured emergency power into the sloop's oversized engines, turning near disaster into a showy direction change. The sloop shot out between the buildings again and back over the ravaged rooftops of the dead city. Nobody watching it fly would have guessed the extent of the damage it had suffered. It held a steady course.

As he approached the staging area for the sloop competition, the pilot saw the cycling lights ahead and knew they were being raided. The local authorities had better things to do, but they still cracked down on the illegal sloop rings at regular intervals. Instinct took over and he sent the sloop into a fast dive and turn, wondering if anyone had even witnessed his stunt. Or were they all running, dodging, escaping, or worse - being loaded into the hoverwagons and carted away to reclamation sites? And worst of all, he knew he would never collect his winnings. That stunt would certainly have pulled in a lot of cash.

He pulled the sticks hard and headed away, hugging the deck to avoid being sported.

The Hangar

Back in the small hangar where he kept the swoop, Maarek Steele surveyed the damage. Without the winnings from the stunt competition, he would have a hard time making repairs. He could pound out and straighten the hull easily enough, but a few servos and some adjusters had been flattened, and replacing them from the black market would be costly.

There was a double knock on the hangar door. He recognized the cadence. It was a friend. Maarek walked to the door, stepping carefully over several half-finished assemblies, peered through the peephole to confirm that it wasn't a trap, and spied Pargo offering a rude gesture toward the peeper. Laughing, Maarek opened the door to let his friend inside.

Though only an inch or two taller than Maarek, Pargo must certainly have outweighed his friend by half again. Not fat. No. Just naturally big. And strong, Pargo could easily out-muscle anyone he met. Any human, anyway. He walked inside quickly and Maarek closed and latched the door behind him.

"So you got away," Maarek offered by way of greeting.

"Was out stunting, just like you," Pargo answered. Indeed, Pargo was still wearing long boots and coveralls - typical swoop gear.

Maarek scowled. "Waste of time," he said. "I would'a won easy. I was powered."

Pargo glanced at Maarek's swoop. "Yeah, maybe. But at least my swoop's still in one piece."

Maarek said nothing. Pargo was right.

Pargo pointed at the front of the swoop. "Hey! What's that?"

Maarek just shrugged.

Pargo fingered a small device bristling with wires and gleaming connectors. He grinned and said, "One of your strange gadgets, I bet."

"Just a modified gyro-servo sensor array I was testing."

Pargo laughed, "Well, there's nothing to gyro-servo now. Why don't you flash down to the Maze. I hear there's been some strangers nosing for info. We could maybe buzz on them. Have a little fun,"

"Probably Bordali spies. To hell with them. To hell with all Bordal. For that matter, to hell with the whole war."

"These guys might know something" suggested Pargo. "You know. About ..." A fierce, almost feral look from Maarek made Pargo hesitate. "So you comin'?" he asked after a moment.

The look evaporated, became something akin to resignation. "Yeah," Maarek answered. "I'll meet you there. I gotta see my mom, bring her some stuff."

Pargo left then, after arranging to meet Maarek at the Maze in three hours. After a last careful survey of the damaged swoop, which had not miraculously repaired itself, Maarek showered, changed, secured the door and walked off into the night.

The Hidden Room

An hour later, Maarek was walking up a steep flight of stairs in a very lonely, very hidden part of the old city. Small creatures scuttled underfoot as he climbed and he could sense the eyes peering through small holes in the walls. He never much liked it here.

At the top of the stairs, he gave a complex knock - it was a code based on the date and some astrophysical calculations. Even someone who followed him and listened would not be able to duplicate that special knock.

The door opened instantly and Maarek walked inside.

The contrast between the dark, half burned-out stairway and this room couldn't have been greater. The room was well lit, clean, and furnished with fine furniture. On the walls, old tapestries shared space with scientific holos of stars of all kinds. Some of the holos were covered with scribbles and indecipherable writing.

Maarek's mother stood near the door. She was a beautiful woman nearing forty. Her dark hair was pulled up and tied in a casual-looking knot held by a large clasp. She wore a simple, utilitarian beige tunic belted at the waist. Her feet were bare.

"You always seem to know when I'm here." Maarek commented, noticing how quickly his mother was at the door.

"The walls have eyes," answered Marina Steele. "And the eyes have mouths." She was smiling, but after a moment the smile disappeared. "We need to talk."

She turned and walked through a doorway into another room as well-furnished as the first. Heavy curtains covered the windows and behind the curtains, Maarek knew, there was another covering to prevent any light at all from leaking out into the street. During the twenty-year war blackouts were standard on Kuan, but this room was sealed practically air tight.

"Sit down," she said,

Maarek sat. He chose a stiff, hard chair that seemed to fit the formality of his mother's tone of voice. He waited while she fixed some local tarine tea in the adjoining kitchen. She took her time, carefully scraping the leaves, arranging them according to custom in the cup, then adding the water. He watched through the open doorway. But he did not get up and join her, nor offer to help. He knew his mother wanted him to wait, to sweat it out.

"You're on the holos, you know/" she said at last, placing his teacup on a small table to his right.

Maarek's eyes widened, "What do you mean?" he asked.

"That stunt you pulled. The raid was broadcast and your stunt was part of the coverage." She sat on a low chair facing him and began to blow on her tea.

"Fireballs! That's beam," he exclaimed, reverting to street talk. But Marina Steele only frowned.

"They had your name . . ." she began.

"So? I always use a ..."

"Your real name," she interrupted.

Maarek said nothing, but he understood. His real name was all-too-well known, and both he and his mother were prime Bordali targets. It was one thing to be linked with illegal swoop gangs. That was a minor offense, and the local military authorities would do only a half-hearted job of pursuing a swoop criminal. But to be related to the famous scientist, Kerek Steele, was something else altogether. Ever since his father's abduction by Bordali agents, he and his mother had been keeping low. though truth to tell, Maarek took too many chances. But capturing Kerek's family would give the Bordali a powerful threat to hold over him. The Bordali would need something to make him cooperate. Ordinary methods would almost certainly not work.

They sat talking for some time. Maarek insisted that the publicity from the swoop episode would not cause them any problems, However. Marina disagreed and insisted it was time for both of them to move on, to find another place to hide. Maarek was just about to tell her she was too cautious for maybe the twentieth time, when there were several loud squeaks from the other room and Maarek's mother leapt to her feet. Too late. A blistering beam of energy hit the outside door just as Maarek followed his mother into the room to investigate. The door glowed for a second, the metal core began to melt, then the whole thing vaporized. Behind it, partially obscured among the fumes and smoke, was a man dressed all in black. In his hand, the heavy blaster glowed.

Quickly, before Maarek had even grasped the situation, Marina was shooting. From somewhere, she had obtained a small one-or two-shot blaster and already the man behind the door was falling backward. Maarek noticed that his mother's hair was loose around her shoulders.

"This way," Marina gasped, grabbing Maarek's arm and dragging him toward the back of the apartment. Maarek followed, feeling helpless and wishing he had a blaster, too.

His mother pulled him into a closet at the back of the building. It seemed a silly thing to do, but suddenly the floor of the closet gave way and they dropped quickly and for some time. When they landed Marina yelled, "Kick it!" and pointed to the wall. He could hear some commotion going on above them and it didn't seem the time to argue with his mother, so Maarek lifted his booted foot and pounded the wall with all his strength. A large section of the wall fell away and he could see the dark alley beyond. They ran.

The Bordali

A low, patchy fog blew through the damp streets, and the only light came from one or two of Kuan's moons. They listened a moment to the sounds of yelling back inside the building. Out on the street it was quiet and, without a word, Marina began running to the left, pulling Maarek along behind her.

Her bare feet made hardly a sound on the rough pavement, but Maarek's boots were not so silent and their slaps against the ground seemed each like small concussion missiles detonating in the alley,

Marina rounded the next corner. Maarek was a few strides behind, catching up quickly. He had no clear idea where she was heading and so just followed without thought, his senses

casting about behind, fearing pursuit. And so he nearly crashed into her as he came around the corner. She was standing rock still, and he was just able to slow his charging gait before he knocked her down. Then he, too, stopped short. There were six of them, all with blasters drawn, all dressed in black.

The black shapes quickly fanned out around them. Marina threw her small blaster on the ground and held out her hands, Maarek shouldered in front of his mother and stood ready to take on the whole lot of them, but Marina whispered. "Give it up. son. If you fight them, they will kill you and take me anyway. They won't kill us if we give up. They want us alive."

"Listen to your mother, boy," one of their assailants said. Then he motioned with his blaster to the others and four of them darted forward. They placed restraints on Maarek's hands and a soundproof hood over his head. The world went dark and completely silent. His last clear image had been of his mother smiling his way, but looking rather sad in fact, as two black figures bound her hands.

He was seized, none too gently, and pushed forward. He stumbled at first, but soon grew used to the pace his captors set, one on each arm, After a few minutes they slowed, then stopped and waited for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than ten minutes. They led him up a ramp. He still couldn't see or hear, but he could feel the ridged walkway under his boots and something told him he was entering a ship.

Someone strapped him into a seat. There was the familiar pull of gravity as the ship accelerated and left the ground. Maarek hungrily used his remaining senses to gain clues to the ship's direction, but the only clear sensation was up.

After a while, the sense of planetary gravity and acceleration was replaced by an even pull - clearly an artificial gravity field. That could only mean they had left Kuan altogether and were in space. He could feel the slight vibration of the ship's engines - they were still under power.

Someone removed his hood then, but not the restraints. He blinked in the sudden light, rubbing his eyes with his bound hands. As his vision cleared, he took in the scene around him. He was in a small cabin with no viewports. He could see a standard sliding hatch ahead of him. He couldn't see behind. The room was large enough to accommodate perhaps a dozen people, but there were only six seats. He guessed he was in some kind of shuttle craft,

His mother was strapped into one of the other seats across the room, her face set in a fierce expression. Two guards with blasters stood at the hatchway. They wore light green Bordali military uniforms. One man in a black uniform stood nearby. He spoke.

"I am Gwadj. I am an agent of the People of Bordal. I just want you to know that we have no particular use for either of you, other than to secure cooperation from your husband ..." He nodded toward Marina. "... and your father," He looked directly into Maarek's eyes. "Please understand. We need only one of you for that purpose. If you cause us any trouble, we will kill one and keep the other."

Nobody said anything, so the man continued. He seemed to need to enjoy his triumph. Maarek wanted to throttle him and shove his grin down his esophagus,

"You may wonder how we located you." he began. "Of course it started with that foolish, but quite entertaining stunt you pulled, boy. Once we had identified you with the swoop gangs, our agents began asking a few discreet questions." The man stopped then and made a quick gesture at one of the guards who immediately ducked through the hatch.

"It's not a good idea for people in your position to have friends," the man went on. "In war, there are no friends," Gwadj turned toward the hatch, and, almost on cue, the guard returned, dragging someone behind him. Maarek gasped. It was Pargo! He looked awful and seemed barely conscious. The guard threw him roughly to the floor where he lay groaning softly. There were many small red marks on his face and arms.

"Your friend was very stubborn. We had a great deal of trouble restraining him, but we have many ways... Strength alone is so overrated. We took the fight out of him and he eventually led us to you." His look of self-satisfaction suddenly evaporated. "You should not have killed one of our officers," he said to Marina, "We have a longish ride ahead of us, and I will have time to enact some punishment for that. We do not allow our people to be killed without reprisals. I may not kill you, Madame Steele." Here, strangely, he stared directly into Maarek's eyes. "But you may wish I had."

There was a commotion behind Maarek, the sound of voices arguing. Maarek wanted to look around to see what was going on, but he and Gwadj were locked in a silent staring battle, and neither would give it up. Finally, Gwadj could wait no longer,

"What in a thousand galaxies is going on?" he cried. Maarek swiveled his head as far around as he could and caught a glimpse of a woman dressed in the same black uniform as Gwadj. She was talking softly, and Maarek couldn't hear what was said. He did notice that the woman was quite attractive, for a Bordali, that is.

Gwadj and the woman left, and only one guard remained, Maarek listened to the sound of the hatch closing with a soft whoosh. The guard stood uncomfortably eyeing Pargo, who still lay semiconscious on the deck.

"Let's get you into some restraints," the guard muttered and began to drag Pargo by one arm toward one of the banks of seats. Maarek could see the man's eyes clearly from where

he sat. He was intent on what he was doing, clearly a little nervous at being left alone with the prisoners. He held a blaster in one hand, dragging Pargo's limp form across the metal deck with the other. A moment later he faltered, as if he had had a sudden thought, or so it seemed to Maarek. But immediately the man winced, his eyes grew wide, and he cried out. It was too late. A great hand had closed over his - the one with the blaster - and turned the gun toward the guard's chest. Pargo was awake!

There was a short, silent struggle, but Pargo was immensely strong - far stronger than the guard - and within moments had forced the guard to his knees. The blaster remained pointed directly at the guard's chest, and as Maarek watched, the man completely lost his will to resist, knowing that to do so would lead to his death.

So, instead of Pargo, it was the Bordali guard who found himself restrained.

"Don't make any noise," Pargo said quietly as he snapped the restraints on the man's hands, and the guard nodded his assent.

"There's a hood over behind those seats," volunteered Maarek. "That'll keep him quiet for sure."

Pargo glanced over at the discarded hoods, then back at the guard. The man looked terrified. "I don't think so. He won't give me any trouble."

"Then get me .out of this seat." said Maarek. "We've got to find a way out of this mess."

"Don't get your hopes up," said Marina. "They've got all the advantages."

"We have this," said Pargo, holding the blaster up,

"One against many," was Marina's reply as Pargo set about freeing her and Maarek from the restraints.

Despite appearances, Maarek could see that his friend was struggling to maintain his balance and bravado. Whatever the Bordali trash had done to him, Pargo had not yet fully recovered.

A few minutes later they were standing together facing the forward hatch wondering what to do, when the ship lurched as if it had hit something. Almost immediately, Gwadj stormed through the hatch, followed closely by the woman in black and another guard. They all carried drawn weapons.

Whatever else he was, Gwadj was quick. He immediately sized up the situation, taking in the guard in his restraints and the blaster in Pargo's hand. He also knew that he had the upper hand.

"Hold your fire. The situation is about to change very quickly now," he said. "There's an Imperial Star Destroyer off our bow and we've been caught in a tractor beam. I'm afraid we are no longer masters of our own destiny." He spoke quietly, in a voice laden with resignation.

"So what are you planning to do?" asked Marina in a voice equally resigned.

Gwadj laughed. A bitter sound. "What am I to do, my lady? I was going to kill you all out of spite, but now... It has been a long war."

"Yes it has," Marina answered. Then, on Gwadj's signal, the three Bordali laid down their blasters. Marina nodded at Pargo who, very reluctantly, followed suit. Then they waited.

When the Imperial stormtroopers arrived, anonymous in their white armor, they came quickly, efficiently, through the shuttle's hatch and took up positions with blasters drawn. One of them spoke. His voice was tinny and distant.

"Come this way," was all he said, then the paratrooper closed ranks around the former enemies. In some way, Maarek knew that the war between the Bordali and the Kuan, or at least his personal war, was over. He followed the stormtroopers into a waiting assault shuttle and from there to the Star Destroyer Vengeance. There his life began.

The Vengeance

They stood in rows stretching off into the distance like great metallic insects on parade. After three months, Maarek had still not assimilated the vastness of the Star Destroyer, and the sight of all the TIE fighters, bombers, and interceptors in the cavernous hangar still had the capacity to overwhelm, and to inspire. And then there were the walkers . . .

He thought often of the irony of his present situation. There they had been, lifelong enemies. Now all that was history. In one moment of destiny, he was made to feel insignificant, and all the causes for which he had stood, likewise.

He was afraid. He knew of the Empire, of course - everyone did - but more by reputation and rumor than by contact or experience. The reputation that preceded the Imperials was

one of efficient brutality. He saw absolutely no hope of escape and fully expected his life to be a short one. In that he was mistaken, however.

When the assault shuttle had taken them to the Star Destroyer, he did not see it - there were no viewports in the small brig where they were held. Stormtroopers watched over them all, and the recent combatants could do no more than stare at each other looking dull and spent. They knew they had arrived at a new location only by the slight bump as the shuttle docked.

They were led at blaster point into a long hallway. They saw little and did not know where they were - if they were on a faraway world or a ship, or an outpost somewhere. They were separated and Maarek was placed in a cell and left alone. Food was provided after a time. Mostly, he waited.

Time passed slowly for Maarek and he kept wondering what had happened to his mother and to Pargo. Then an officer came to his cell and spoke with him for a while. He told Maarek that the Empire had declared martial law in his solar system and that all worlds now served the Emperor.

"There is peace now among your planets. No more senseless death and destruction," he said. "What do you think about that?"

Maarek didn't know what he thought. The war was all he had ever known, and yet he hated it bitterly. It had destroyed his world, taken his father, and done nobody any good. He knew both his parents had been against it, and he had been raised to share that view. So he answered, "I think it's a good idea." That seemed a pretty safe answer, considering where he was.

The officer nodded. He noted something in a datapad, then asked, "Do you have any skills we would find useful?"

"I might. But I want to know about my mother before I answer any more questions."

The man made another note. Then he waited. Maarek waited, too. Finally the officer shrugged his shoulders. "Your mother is fine. You'll see her soon. Now can you answer my question?"

Maarek realized he had won a minor, if inconsequential, victory, "I am a pretty fair swoop pilot and mechanic. I also have a fair acquaintance with general science and astrophysics," he answered truthfully. "I used to throw a mean hoverball," he added, though he figured it was useless information.

The man made more notes, then stood and said, "Thank you." He left.

The next day another officer arrived with a small escort of shipboard troopers. He introduced himself as Lieutenant P'arghat and asked Maarek to follow him. Happy to leave the confines of his cell, and hoping he wasn't going to be shot or otherwise mistreated, he followed.

The man led him to smallish amphitheatre that contained perhaps 150 seats arranged before a small raised platform. A few civilians occupied some of the seats, and guards were arranged at intervals against the walls. The civilians were dressed in the same outfit Maarek was wearing - white pajama-like pants and shirts with the Imperial logo emblazoned here and there on the fabric and a large, very readable number on the back of the shirt. Prisoner's clothes.

Maarek was shown to a seat and told to stay put. He watched as others arrived and soon recognized several people - Pargo came in, then his mother, the Bordali woman from the shuttle, and he thought he recognized another of the Bordali soldiers. He did not see Gwadj. He recognized public figures from both Kuan and Bordal. Of course most of the people were total strangers, but many had the look of battle-hardened soldiers. Both his mother and Pargo smiled when they spotted him, but there was an obvious tension about their faces which Maarek was sure his echoed. This was no time or place for rejoicing or happy reunions. Who knew what these Imperial conquerors were up to?

After a time the amphitheatre was filled. Then a man in a formal Imperial uniform approached the raised platform and began to speak. His voice was amplified, though Maarek guessed that his natural voice was quiet.

"Beings of Taroan. I am Admiral Mordon, your host aboard this ship. I have invited you here to introduce you to the Empire and to help you understand what our purpose is and what your roles may be. You have been chosen from among your people for a variety of reasons. Some of you will return to your home planets and serve the Emperor. Others may, if they qualify, join the Imperial fleet and help us bring order and peace to the galaxy. For now, please listen and learn. Later, you will have an opportunity to ask questions."

The Origin of the Empire

"Do you know why your system has been at war for twenty years?" Mordon began. "Do you know why you have suffered for so long without real leadership, strong economies, and a valued position within the galaxy? Your problems started many years ago, with the Republic."

"Long ago, when the Clone Wars ended, the galaxy was divided up by a group of beings who called themselves senators. These senators formed a government designed to make them more powerful and rich. They were the elite, and all other beings were their unwitting accomplices in the systematic pillage of a thousand thousand worlds,

"Of course, the senators made it sound as if they were going to govern fairly, represent their systems, and bring peace and harmony to the galaxy. As you are well aware, they did no such thing. When was the last time Taroan received any aid, commerce, or direction from the so-called Republic?"

The man hesitated at that moment and there was a low murmur in the crowd. His words had produced the desired effect. People were grumbling about the Republic, which had never in recent memory paid any attention to the Taroan system.

"The corruption of the senators gradually came to light, in large part due to the efforts of one of their members - a strong-willed, but uncompromising senator named Palpatine. Senator Palpatine worked diligently to expose the corruption and rot, the rampant opportunism that was bleeding the lifeblood of the galaxy. He was one of the few idealists who believed in the rhetoric of the Republic and who had worked his way to his position through years of service to his fellow beings.

"Soon, he learned that to expose corruption was both dangerous and ineffective. His enemies were too well-entrenched, so he took a different approach. He worked within the system, gradually making allies of many key members of the senate, the Republican Guard, and even those Jedi Knights who remained uncorrupted.

"His great vision was to bring unity and equity to all the worlds, but he quickly saw the weakness of the Republican system. A perceptive student of history, he knew that the greatest strength comes with centralized, individual leadership, backed by a powerful military. This was the vision that he followed, and such was the strength and perseverance of his effort that he was able to form a powerful coalition of leaders who eventually named him Emperor. The era of peace and prosperity had begun.

"However, out in the Rim, among the outer planets, events of such importance might not have produced any benefit, due to the long neglect of the Republic. It is our mission to bring that unity to the Empire. We carry the force to do so if necessary, but our mission is diplomatic. We will install our sector governors and local authorities, bring order to your worlds, and make them productive members of the Empire.

"Today the worlds of the galactic Core enjoy prosperity, security, and tremendous growth. With a strong central government, each planet, each system, and each sector contributes its part. The hardy settlers of the Cardua system excel at mining the rich ore deposits of

their asteroid belts. Their neighbors in the Xorth system enjoy rich soil and trade largely in agricultural goods. They also provide the finest Farrberries in the galaxy - prized for their fine scent and invigorating effect. Each benefits from the efforts of the others. Taroon also has a role to play, and we are here to give you the opportunity to join the greatest empire of all time.

"There are dangers, even to this great Empire - to you and to all of us. The Emperor wants you to know who our common enemies are. First, there is the problem of rogue alien races who cannot, or will not live in peaceful coexistence and commerce with the human race, or who have designs of conquest themselves - races like the Mon Calamarians and the Wookiee. You can join us in thwarting their destructive efforts.

"There are also some who wish to resurrect the old corruption. Led by former senators who want to return to their corrupt ways, these rebels have dared to interfere with our attempts to bring peace to the galaxy. Make no mistake. They are led by desperate and persuasive criminals, and they have made unholy alliances with some of the very alien races who desire our destruction. We welcome qualified volunteers in the fight against these evil beings and their lies."

The admiral stopped speaking and looked over the assemblage, Maarek felt his eyes sweep over and, very briefly, lock onto his. Or so it seemed. The moment was very fleeting, but it somehow made Maarek feel noticed - and very uneasy. Then the man continued his speech. He spoke as if he were welcoming them to a hotel or resort. As if he were speaking to paying customers or invited guests. Maarek supposed some of the audience might actually have been invited, but many were dressed, like him, in prisoner's clothes.

"You are on one of many great ships of the Emperor's fleet," said Mordon. "This is the Imperial Star Destroyer Vengeance. Nearby are several other Star Destroyers and a few frigates. We are here to assure you and your neighbors peace, order, and prosperous commerce.

"Many of you have never seen a Star Destroyer before. I will now acquaint you with this marvelous instrument of peace and order."

Then the lights dimmed and a holo projection appeared near the man. It showed a great ship, dagger-shaped and ending in a raised wall topped by two cylindrical projections. Though it looked quite complex, there was no scale by which to judge it, and Maarek looked on with mild interest.

"This is an Imperial-class Star Destroyer," the man announced with obvious pride. "It is an impressive bit of engineering. By way of comparison. I'll show you what a standard interplanetary shuttle craft would look like in scale."

A small shuttle appeared, much like the one the Bordali had used to transport Maarek and his mother. It was merely a speck. Maarek felt his heart skip. He was inclined to suspect some trickery, but the man went on, as if reading his mind.

"This is no exaggeration, beings of Taroon. This is accurate. Very few if any of you have ever seen anything like it. You are now located on Deck 50 in the mid octal of the ship.

"A Star Destroyer contains many thousands of soldiers and crewmembers. It is, essentially, a city in space - or a fortress. Each Star Destroyer carries dozens of heavy turbolasers and ion cannons and a variety of other offensive and defensive armaments. In addition, each carries several squadrons of TIE fighters and TIE bombers as well as peace-keeping groups of AT-AT and AT-ST walkers and various other surface vehicles."

Then it suddenly hit Maarek like a 10-g deceleration. This wasn't a recruitment lecture, as he had thought at first. This was a thinly disguised threat. This Star Destroyer carried enough destructive power to level a relatively small planet like Kuan. If the Empire actually had more than one of these behemoths, it was no wonder they were able so easily to declare themselves masters of a whole system. And that's why so many leaders from both Kuan and Bordal were here. This "invitation" being extended to the worlds of Taroon was offered with a blaster to their heads. They cooperated. Or else.

But what was Maarek doing here? What did they want from him?

Meanwhile, the admiral made a signal to someone and a holo presentation began. It was a sort of guided tour of the Star Destroyer, making it look more than anything like some well-armed military hotel. Music accompanied the presentation, and fitted itself well to the mood of the images being displayed.

"The Imperial-class Star Destroyer is home to tens of thousands of space-borne troopers and crew. Here, in the civilian area, you see many beings going about their business. There are shops, services, eating establishments, and leisure centers."

As the narrator spoke, the holo showed something that might have been a street in a prosperous city, except that everything was on a somewhat smaller scale. The projection angles had been chosen well to give the impression of a lot of space, but Maarek saw that the whole scene showed a fairly small area - at least by planetary standards. Then the scene shifted.

The holo showed several images in quick succession. First, there was a small suite, spotless and new looking. There was a bedroom, living area with communications nook, and a small toilet room. There was no kitchen or apparent eating location. The narration that accompanied the images said this was the typical quarters for the crew. It looked inviting, almost cozy.

The music became more heroic and the holo shifted to an area loaded with equipment and people working. The narrator identified it as a control room, "one of many aboard the Star Destroyer." There was a bustle of beings, mostly human, running back and forth from one console to another, looking exceedingly busy and efficient. "The Star Destroyer is run by a dedicated crew of skilled technicians. They control the many functions of the ship including propulsion and navigation parameter input, life support monitoring, shield management, and weapon charging. There are several specialized control rooms as well. For instance, each bank of the Star Destroyer's turbolasers has a separate downstream control area, and there are terminal allocation stations for each hangar to handle and route all traffic to and from the ship."

The scene dissolved to show a large room dominated by a raised balcony. The scene depicted a large holomap. Again, there were various soldiers and crew busy at work on various mysterious machines.

"Tactical operations are handled from the central planning bridge. Here, the commander and his crew can maintain constant awareness of ongoing operations."

The holo presentation continued, showing some of the other sights of the Star Destroyer, including a quick look at one of the huge turbolasers. Finally, the image faded, the music went silent, and there was a moment of utter stillness within the amphitheatre. Then, slowly, the image of a man appeared in the holosphere. He was dressed in a long robe and hood, and Maarek felt a resonance within him. Here was a great man of ascetic values and deep thoughts. The man's face was shrouded beneath an oversized hood, so only parts of him could be seen.

There was something about him that drew you to him, The man spoke. His voice was soft, yet it pierced the senses.

"I am . . . the Emperor,' the man said. He said it simply, with no pretense, but with just a little hesitation to make the idea sink in. This really was the Emperor!

"Maarek - he called Maarek by name, he could swear it - you have been called upon to join us, to join for the good of all beings." It was terrifying. In front of all these people, how could he be addressing Maarek? Or was it some trick of the mind? Already, Maarek was unsure whether he had heard correctly or not. But the hooded being was speaking still, and his voice and inflection rose slowly as he did. "Those who oppose us must be destroyed. Those who would corrupt others, enslave them, and steal what belongs to us all must be stopped. It is time for strength. It is time to remove the last obstacles to peace, prosperity, and real power, such as has not been seen in the galaxy since the days of legend."

Maarek felt each word the man spoke, as if it were a physical entity. The Emperor spoke for some time, denouncing his enemies and promising to eliminate them. He spoke of loyalty and of peaceful domination over all the worlds. And by the time he had finished speaking, Maarek was ready to do anything, go anywhere, to serve him. The Emperor was the only hope for unity and strength. Unity and strength. It became Maarek's motto.

That was three months ago. Now Maarek worked as a mechanic in one of the main hangars aboard the Star Destroyer, surrounded by rows of vehicles ranging from TIE fighters to Imperial walkers. He was lasing a new heat panel onto the side of a TIE interceptor that had come in for repairs.

They had left Taroon behind and were light years away by now. Marina had stayed on Kuan to try to help in the transition of power and to look for her husband. Both Maarek and Pargo had joined up, seduced by the excitement and the power of the Empire. Also, though he couldn't explain it,

Maarek had a strong feeling that his father was no longer in Taroon and hoped to find him somewhere in the vastness of the galaxy

This hangar was a repair and construction facility, and all the vehicles here were either under construction or were damaged and in need of repair. Great burn marks, slashes, and twisted metal confirmed the fact that not all systems were as easily assimilated as Taroon had been. The Vengeance was constantly on the move, making hyperspace jumps from one hot spot to the next.

Though Maarek had no reason to know about the military missions of the Star Destroyer, there were always rumors and stories filtering down even to his level, and he knew the Vengeance was involved in several actions simultaneously. They would jump into an area of conflict, launch TIE fighters or landing craft, then jump to another area to launch additional ships or to provide support to ongoing operations. Each time they jumped, he could feel a slight displacement or blurring of vision, but it quickly passed.

In the past few hours, the Vengeance had made several jumps. Then, perhaps an hour ago, several damaged fighter craft had been brought into the hangar. Maarek and the other mechs were working hard to bring them back into service. Earlier there had been several muffled thumps and someone told Maarek it might have been heavy torpedoes hitting the Star Destroyer's shields.

It was quiet now and the TIE interceptor was repaired. Maarek asked permission of the foreman to test the interceptor. It was an unwritten rule that Repairs was supposed to perform shakedown tests of the vehicles before handing them back over to Ops. Many mechs had learned the basics of piloting, and Maarek's swoop experience made him a natural.

"We're in planetary orbit over Farboon," the foreman told him, "There's no action out there. Go ahead, but make it quick. We're scheduled for another jump in three hours.'

Maarek climbed into the TIE/In and adjusted the seat and belts. He wasn't wearing the standard TIE pilot's helmet and life support gear, but a modified version the repair crew had rigged together. He didn't worry about wearing sub-standard gear, however. This was the moment he always waited for. Even if it only lasted a few minutes - just long enough to test the fighter's systems - it was like being a bird freed from its cage.

He signaled over the comlink that he was ready and fired up the twin ion engines. There was a dull roar inside the cockpit and the vehicle began to shudder a little. He made a mental note to pass this one over to an engine specialist when he was finished. Then he guided the small craft onto its repulsor lifts and toward the airlock.

As soon as he blasted out into space, he was greeted by the image of a great planet that dominated the blackness. It was green, blue, and white and it hovered directly ahead, Maarek had never flown near a planet, and he took a moment to enjoy the view. He scanned for any other ships, but saw none. He rolled the fighter to take a quick look at the Star Destroyer - he never got tired of looking at it, could never quite absorb the grandeur and immensity of it. Then he began to run the TIE/In through its paces, watching carefully for any signs of malfunction.

Normally Repair operated on its own comlink frequency, but Maarek had discovered how to tune the link to a dual band that also picked up one of the non-restricted military channels. He liked to listen in on their operations, even though nothing of importance was broadcast over the channels he could hear.

Today was different. Just as he was about to head reluctantly for the hangar again, there was a sudden squawk on his headset and an urgent voice came on.

"All units. Is there anyone operational? Emergency. Please report."

Maarek did not answer. He wasn't supposed to be on this band, after all. But the voice kept calling and, apparently, not receiving any answer. Finally, Maarek decided to find out what was happening.

"This is Steele," he said into the mike. "What's the problem?"

"Who the hell are you, Steele? Where are you?" the voice demanded.

"I'm in Repair, testing a TIE/In for return to duty, sir."

"We've got a shuttle in trouble ..." the voice said quickly. He seemed to be listening to someone else speaking at the same time because his transmission came in bursts of speech separated by short pauses. "No time to argue. Escort destroyed . . . Too close to planet . . . Get over to the far side . . . Find the shuttle ..." Then he relayed some coordinates and vectors that Maarek only vaguely understood. But he fired the engines to full power and headed around the edge of the planet. "We'll be back ..." was the last thing he heard from the voice. Then he was alone.

Looking at his scanners, he saw the Star Destroyer was gone.

The Shuttle

Navigation and acquisition of targets in raw space is no easy matter, but within a star system you sometimes get a little help from local sunlight glinting off metal surfaces. So it was that Maarek spotted the shuttle and its attackers maneuvering in the lonely blackness above the planet's atmosphere. Soon he could see the blue glow characteristic of ion cannons flickering across the surface of the shuttle's shields. Of course he had no idea what ion cannon glow looked like, just that it was easily visible.

"I see them." he said into the comlink. There was no answer.

As he sped closer, he was able to spot two Y-wing fighters shooting at the shuttle, which clearly showed Empire markings. There was some debris floating about, and he recognized parts of several TIE fighters,

Maarek didn't recognize the markings on the attacking Y-wings. but it didn't matter. They were the enemy. Without thought he rolled into an attack angle that gave him a chance at both Y-wings on the same pass. The TIE/In responded smoothly, more smoothly than any swoop ever could, and sped closer to the scene. Maarek's hand gripped the controls and his finger tightened slightly on the stud that would fire the interceptor's weapons.

Just then, the nearer of the two Y-wings broke off and began to veer away. He'd been spotted! Maarek pressed the stud and saw the momentary glare of laser fire, but only from two of his lasers. He hadn't quad-linked the lasers, and he wasn't sure how to do so. Mechs generally weren't allowed to test weapons. Even so, the dual lasers fired straight and true, and there was a brief glow in the aft section of the Y-wing - a partial hit!

But the enemy craft did not slow down and appeared undamaged. Maarek was tempted to follow the Y-wing; it appeared to be moving much slower than his interceptor. The second

Y-wing was still attacking the shuttle, however. and Maarek altered course slightly to bear directly on it. He began firing as he adjusted his angle, and his first shots went wide. As he closed the gap, he started seeing the telltale glow along the body of the Y-wing. He was hitting the shields! The Y-wing stopped firing at the shuttle and began to move away, but very slowly.

He was mesmerized by the sight of his enemy trapped in his sights, and failing to adjust his closing speed, he almost crashed into it. At the last second he veered off. Then his on-board computer registered that he was being fired upon. As he twisted the TIE/In through a hard diagonal loop, he spotted the other Y-wing closing in on him.

He had the advantage of speed, but he realized that he couldn't abandon the shuttle while it was still in danger. Fortunately his swoop training gave him an instinctual feel for combat and he doubled back on the Y-wing that had shot at him, watched it overshoot the shuttle, and went in behind both Y-wings again. That's when he spotted the first X wing fighters. They popped out of nowhere several thousand meters off the shuttle's bow.

"I'm in big trouble now," he said to nobody in particular.

Maarek pressed the firing stud, taking a few last shots at the Y-wings, then yanked hard on the controls to pull into a narrow turn. He didn't know if the X-wings were after the shuttle, or him. He did figure that he wouldn't have much of a chance against the combined firepower of two Y-wings and two X-wings, If he was to do any good he'd have to pick his times, so he needed some distance.

He headed at full speed away from the crippled shuttle craft. The two X-wings followed. They were remarkably fast, and kept pace with him. They shot at him constantly, but they were just too far away for accuracy. He began to double back toward the shuttle and saw that the Y-wings were returning to the attack. Just then, the Star Destroyer reappeared at minimum safe distance from the planet. If he could just keep the enemy busy for a few more minutes, he was sure that help would arrive.

This thought was confirmed when the radio came back to life. "This is Vee Two X-ray calling TIE/In Four Oh Vee Niner. Do you read?"

Maarek wasn't used to military call signs, "If that's me you're calling, I'm here," he answered. "Get someone here - fast!"

"Help is on the way, TIE An Four Oh Vee Niner. Hang in, there."

He couldn't make the interceptor move faster and the X-wings were getting closer. It would be a shame to get shot down now, with help so close. He started to corkscrew to throw off their aim - he had seen pilots do it in adventure holos. His idea was good, but in execution it

left something to be desired. He lost control momentarily and found himself spinning and disoriented. Trying to get back on course, he overcompensated and found himself heading directly for the planet. His scanners showed the X-wings still in pursuit - much closer now.

Something hit the interceptor. He felt a jolt, like a strong punch in the back, then the sensors went dead. There was no time for more maneuvering, so he headed into the sludge. He had heard that flying in atmosphere was hard and that no starfighter pilot liked it, but he knew atmospheric flight and he was gambling that the X-wing pilots didn't.

The TIE/In began to shudder and pitch as it hit the wall of gas and a thick mist immediately obscured his vision. He fought the interceptor, leveling out so as not to dive directly down into the planet's gravity well. His plan was to dip into the upper atmosphere and follow a shallow parabolic vector, reemerging once again in the vacuum. He hoped this would shake the X-wings.

It was like fighting an enraged bantha, and he had no way to know if he was really pulling out of the atmosphere or about to become a fireball on the surface of the planet. He tried to keep his bearings, but without sensors or visual clues, he had to rely on hope and luck.

A part of him, calm despite the crisis, realized that he had already pushed luck to the limit. With no formal training, he had just gone up against four enemy fighters and he was still alive! Had he used up all the luck he was allowed?

The answer was no. The mist surrounding the interceptor suddenly thinned and, with a last bone-jarring bump, burst out of the sludge and back into vacuum. There was no sign of the X-wings. For that matter, there was no sign of the Star Destroyer!

"Great," he said to himself. "Now what do I do?"

"Head back home, Steele," said a new voice on the comlink. "The excitement's over. Come around on vector One Two Eight Alpha."

"Sorry, sir. Sensors are out and I'm no navigator," Maarek said.

There was laughter in his headset. "Just turn right and follow the planet around. You'll find us. Or we'll find you."

The next few hours were a blur of activity. As soon as he got within range, the Star Destroyer hauled him in with a tractor beam - an ignominious ending to the most exciting adventure of his life. He was beamed into an unfamiliar hangar where a detachment of stormtroopers waited. As soon as he exited the ship, an officer told him to follow and led him from the hangar to a small room nearby. Then the officer and the stormtroopers left him alone in the room.

He sat at a small table. There were two chairs in the room and he picked the one that faced the doorway. He waited. And waited. "I'm in trouble," he thought. "But what did I do wrong?"

He sat for a long time, hours perhaps, before the door irised and emitted two stormtroopers in white and black armor. The troopers had their blasters drawn, but Maarek's eyes were focused on the man who followed them. He recognized the man immediately. It was Admiral Mordon! He looked tired.

The Admiral sat stiff and straight in the remaining chair, facing Maarek, silent, staring, his eyes blazing blue like an ion furnace. Maarek looked down at his hands resting on the table. The knuckles were white.

"You were lucky," Mordon said. His voice was quiet, just as Maarek had suspected it would be, and the medals on the man's chest rose and fell evenly with his breathing.

Maarek slowly raised his eyes, but could not quite meet Mordon's stare, "I know, sir. I hope..."

Mordon interrupted. "You were also very brave."

Something skipped inside Maarek's chest. That wasn't a reprimand. It was a compliment.

Mordon continued. "We had secured the area. I was on the way to inspect the planet with a minimal escort when the Rebels struck, If you hadn't delayed them ..,"

Maarek said nothing. He was too stunned. I saved the admiral.

"... where did you learn to handle an interceptor like that, son?" Maarek snapped out of his daze just in time to catch Mordon's question.

"In Repairs, sir," he choked. Was that going to get him into trouble?

But the admiral raised an eyebrow. "Repairs ..." He seemed to ruminate over the word a moment, as if it had lost its usual meaning. Then he asked,

"You like it in Repairs, Stele?"

"It's all right," Maarek replied carefully, "We get to take care of the

babies." Again, Mordon raised an eyebrow. "Babies?"

"You know, sir. The pilots. They just hop into the cockpit and fly around in space while we have to break our hands twisting metal back in place or burn ourselves on hot sparks from the laser torches. . ."

Maarek stopped, worried that he had stepped over the line, but Mordon just laughed out loud. "Is that what you think a pilot's life is like, son?"

Maarek said nothing.

Suddenly, Mordon stood up. "I bet you'd like to be one of the babies, wouldn't you, Mr. Steele?" he asked, leaning over the table and staring down at Maarek, who suddenly noticed something under one of his fingernails.

"Come see me in six months," Mordon said as he turned toward the doorway. "Let me know how you're doing."

Then he was gone, and Maarek was alone again. But not for long.

The Imperial Navy

Maarek was "invited" to join the Imperial Navy and told he was going to be trained as a fighter pilot. He had to wait a few days; then, after a jump he was escorted to an old freighter/transport. He spent a short, uncomfortable day aboard the freighter and arrived safely at a planetside Imperial base. During the whole trip nobody spoke to him. When he arrived at the base, he received some rations and was told to wait again. After a while, a small detachment of stormtroopers arrived with a pack of young men and women in tow. Then the troopers marched them to another freighter/transport. Or maybe it was the same one. Maarek couldn't tell. When everybody was stowed in, the leader spoke.

"You are on your way to Imperial basic training. As of this moment, you are Imperial soldiers, even though you look like scared dinkos and smell worse. You will sit still, keep quiet, and do nothing until you receive further orders."

It was a long and quiet trip, shivering in the cargo hold under the watchful eyes of the stormtroopers. They must have looked more like prisoners than elite Imperial recruits. Maarek fought off his concerns. He figured that it was all part of the game. No matter how good you were, they had to break you first, then build you up again. It was part of the weeding out process. If you broke too easily, then you wouldn't hold up under the pressures of combat, and were a danger to those who depended on you. If you wouldn't

break at all, you were too independent and prideful, and could never be trusted completely. It was a fine line that every recruit would walk over the next six months.

The ship lurched out of hyperspace and everyone slid slightly on the deck as dynamic braking took hold. Suddenly, the stoic figures of the stormtroopers sprang to life, leaping through the huddled cadets, kicking those unlucky enough to be prone and shouting at the top of their lungs.

"On your feet, you mass of gravel maggots, or you won't live long enough to even begin basic training."

Maarek was fast enough to avoid a boot slung in his direction, and sprang up with a rush of adrenaline in his veins and scanned the room for the next challenge. He didn't have to wait long. As the stormtroopers herded them into some semblance of ranks, the forward airlock of the cargo hold slid open with a menacing hiss. There, with all eyes in the room upon him, stood a man-like form, backlit, dark, and larger than life.

He was clad in trooper armor, but the reddish light behind him cast an eerie glow, and an Imperial crest on the right breastplate literally screamed out the man's importance. As troopers moved to flank the man, Maarek noticed with some displeasure that the newcomer was more than a head taller than anyone in the room. Two massive hands reached upward and twisted the helmet release gingerly, belying the ease with which they could just have easily snapped a man's neck. The helmet rose and was tucked casually under a massive left arm. Some unlucky soul behind Maarek gasped and received a rifle butt to the side of the knee for the indiscretion. He writhed on the floor now, but had gained enough sense not to cry out.

Doubtless, others had stifled similar exclamations upon witnessing the scarred visage that glowered at them through one intense eye, its partner a memory behind crudely stitched skin. Maarek wanted to look away, but found it difficult. It probably wouldn't have been wise anyway.

"I am Senior Master Sergeant Jona T. Stark," it said, "but you will call me Sergeant, or Sir. You have no names other than those I choose to give you. You have no lives other than those I bestow upon you. You have no choice other than to obey. The Emperor is your life. I am his Voice. I will find the Warriors amongst you and guide them to the glory of the Empire. More importantly, I will find the unworthy, I will hold their hearts in my hand, and I will crush them,"

And so it began...

Basic Training

The first day was a marvel of activity, chaos, and eventual order. They were processed, tested, marched, fed (a little), tested some more, divided into groups, and, finally, assigned

quarters. Already several recruits that Maarek had noticed in the transport were missing, presumably sent back where they came from.

Maarek had no idea what his subjective time was, but the base time was late when he was finally able to collapse onto his hard, small bunk in a drafty barracks. Each recruit had been given a small holo and told, "Absorb this and be ready to regurgitate it tomorrow." And so he sat up, grabbed the holo and activated it.

Over the next several weeks, he was tested, drilled in military procedure, put through basic physical training, and tested again. He had no idea where he was. Nobody ever said. And he learned soon enough not to ask. He learned a lot more as well, and to all outward appearances became a fully indoctrinated soldier of the Empire. He kept his own counsel, however, and endured until the ordeal was over.

When his basic training was done, he was picked up again, this time in a troop shuttle, and taken to an outpost on a forlorn-looking asteroid where he spent a few hours in a backwater depot chewing on rations and discussing matters of no importance with the lone agent in charge. He was the only recruit who had been left on that particular outpost. Eventually another shuttle arrived and took him to rendezvous with the Vengeance along with a few strangers.

In all, he had been away from the Vengeance for a little more than two months. Nothing much had changed.

Except that he was no longer quartered in the civilian area of the ship.

"Orders are posted on the holo screen up on the wall." announced the non-com when he debarked the shuttle. Maarek read his housing assignment. It was on Deck 3 and the map showed it to be near the main TIE fighter hangar. Pilot's quarters, he thought with a growing sense of awe and nervousness.

He had learned during basic training not to ask questions. This concept did not come easily to him, and several times he had been put on extra duty for opening his mouth. It's not easy to lose a lifelong habit in just a few weeks, but Maarek did learn to restrain himself, to bide his time, and to pick his friends and confidants with care.

One drawback to his new restraint was that he got thoroughly lost looking for his assigned quarters where a simple question or two might have gotten him there more quickly. At any rate, he found his way, but not before barging into areas where he was clearly not welcome, where officers and enlisted men looked up from what they were doing and glared. But nobody asked him what he was doing or offered any help, and Maarek went on his way as quickly as he could.

His new room was a haven of privacy after weeks in the training barracks and an hour or so lost on the massive Star Destroyer. There was a single cot in the room, and he lay down on it as soon as he arrived.

Moments later, someone came to the door and signalled.

"Come in," Maarek said tentatively.

It was Pargo. He stood there beaming stupidly, and Maarek almost burst out laughing. His friend was decked out in a crisp new naval uniform. He saluted, Maarek returned the salute half-heartedly, sick already of the formality of the military life. "What's the big smile for?" he asked.

Pargo walked into the room and leaned against a built-in desk. "Good to see you, too," he said offhandedly. Clearly he was dying to tell Maarek something. He looked like the ice creature that had eaten the tauntaun.

"Come on. Out with it." Maarek didn't much like it when someone stretched out the telling of important news, and judging by the rictus that passed for Pargo's smile, this was something pretty big, "Are you going to stand there all day, or what?"

"OK, Don't get your trainats in a snit. I'm happy for two reasons. First, you're back from training and are finally one of us. There's a lot that goes on aboard the Star Destroyer that civilians never know about ..."

"Yeah," said Maarek cautiously. "And the other reason?"

"I'm going to be a stormtrooper. They asked me to start training in three days."

Maarek wasn't sure why Pargo was so happy. Sure, the stormtroopers were among the most feared and respected of the military divisions, but wearing all that armor and being so nameless and faceless had never appealed much to Maarek, On the other hand . . .

"That's great, Pargo. I guess you'll fill out that armor real well. I think I'm going to be trained to be a pilot."

Pargo's smile faded. "You mean you're going to fly those rickety TIE fighters. Those things are death traps. Are you crazy?"

"Guess so," Maarek answered. "You heard about my little adventure?"

"Yeah," answered Pargo. "I heard. Just like you to hot dog it like that. You're never satisfied, are you?"

Maarek laughed. "Some of us have it: some don..."

But Pargo was serious again. "You just watch yourself. This isn't a swoop race. You're gonna end up in chunks floating through a gas cloud if you aren't careful."

"Worry about yourself, Pargo. Stormtrooper armor won't stop a direct blaster shot. And knowing you, you'll probably stand in front of a blaster just to find out."

"Guess we're both due for a short, fast life," Pargo managed, his lips curling at the corners in a wry smile. "Anyway, gotta go. I've got a duty schedule in a few minutes."

Shortly after Pargo left, a message appeared on the small comlink board in Maarek's room. It told him to report to pilot training at 0700 hours the next morning.

Pilot Training

The first day of pilot training consisted of a self-paced halo training session. He reported to the registration desk for pilots aboard the Star Destroyer and gave his name. The guards at the door then let him enter the training/flight ops concourse.

One of the other pilots, a young man everyone called Brick, joined him inside the concourse. They walked along a narrow catwalk inside a cavernous room. Ahead was a tall elevator column that reached up to the ceiling. Other catwalks curved around and through the space and various doorways lined the walls on several levels, Maarek gawked shamelessly at the spaciousness of the room. He was still having a hard time getting used to the dimensions of the Star Destroyer, and this was yet another reminder of the sheer immensity of the vessel.

Brick pointed out the various doorways, each leading to a different area.

"First, you've got the Training Simulator," he said. "Once you've taken some basic instruction, you'll go there to prove you know how to fly a fighter."

"Then comes the Combat Chamber. You get to fly simulations of real missions from history. The instructors here set a lot of store on how you do in the historical sims. Actually, it's

pretty fun. It's just like the real thing, but you can get blown up and it doesn't matter, Not that you want to get used to being blown up.

"On the second level, in the back, you get to check the holes of your battles in the Film Room. To the left is the Tech Room where you can learn all about various spacecraft. The instructors like you to spend some time there, too. They claim it might just save your life in combat,

"Finally, there's the doorway that leads to the ready room and real missions. After your training is done, that's where you'll go, Hey, it's time for your first sim lesson, cadet Steele. Good luck."

Maarek entered the Combat Chamber then, where a great machine opened to allow him inside. Once he was strapped in, the huge machine closed over him like some giant beast devouring him. All was darkness at first, Then, with a mental lurch, he found himself staring out into a starry vacuum. His hand gripped the controls as a sensation of movement and weightlessness overcame him. The simulation was as close to flying as he could imagine, and he quickly gave himself over to the experience.

During his first session, Maarek learned basic information about the role of a pilot as well as the systems and controls found on Imperial fighter craft. Much of it was familiar - he had repaired or replaced most of these systems at one time or another. Some of it was new, however, and he absorbed it all eagerly. The sooner he got through this part of the training, the sooner he'd be back behind the controls of a real starfighter!

It was nearly a week before Maarek got his first training opportunity inside a trainer TIE bomber. The instructor, a Captain Trox, sat in an extra seat in the specially modified craft and helped Maarek become familiar with the instruments and their functions. Of course Maarek had already learned most of this on his own during his stint in Repairs, but he kept his mouth shut, for the most part,

"First thing you do. Cadet Steele, is settle into this seat and adjust straps and helmet. Most of our fighter craft lack life support, and this helmet and mask are what will keep you breathing, mister So don't forget to check it out before you get spaceborne."

Maarek adjusted the helmet and tasted the slightly stale air that came through the rebreather apparatus. Captain Trox donned his own helmet and spoke through the comlink. His voice was tinny in the speaker, but clear. He walked Maarek through the proper pre-launch procedures and soon robotic arms lifted the trainer TIE bomber and transported it along the hangar rail system to the launch platform. They powered up the twin ion engines and lifted off. Trox piloted the craft at first on auxiliary controls and soon they were in open space, the Vengeance falling away in the distance.

"Today you're going to learn about standard cockpit controls. In this trainer craft, all parts of the cockpit are clearly labeled, and I will refer to the labels as I point them out to you. Listen carefully. I don't like to repeat myself. And you don't want to be in a small cockpit with me when I'm in a bad mood."

Maarek went through the pre-combat procedures several times, making few mistakes. But Trox wasn't satisfied, even when he ran through the procedure perfectly.

"Faster," Trox would order. "You're as slow as a space slug. Where do you think you are, your mamma's dinner table? You'll be eating laser fire if you don't move faster than that."

"That's about all for today, Steele. You want to take us back in?"

"Yes. Sir," Maarek replied, already beginning to angle the TIE fighter around in a tight turn back toward the Star Destroyer. Maarek figured to keep his mouth shut, though he wanted to ask some questions, but Trox, it seemed, was in a talkative mood.

"The real key to successful control of your fighter craft is managing energy," he said suddenly. "Do you remember what I told you about the LES displays?"

"I do, sir," Maarek answered promptly.

"All right. I want you to slow this fighter down the most efficient way you can think of."

Maarek's hand twitched on the throttle controls and he was about to pull back on the lever. He stopped himself and quickly reasoned out Trox's order. The "most efficient" way . . . Maarek reached for the button marked F9 and pressed it twice, placing the laser recharge rates at maximum.

"Well ..." came Trox's tinny voice over the speaker. "I'll give you that one, boy. Not many green recruits get that one right. "

They were nearing the Star Destroyer, and Trox let Maarek perform the necessary communications with landing control. Soon they were tractored into the hangar and the robotic arms carried them back to the hangar. Maarek's initial instructional flight was over. And he had, in the end, actually learned something!

Picket Duty

Maarek's first mission after becoming a bonafide starfighter pilot was a routine assignment at a waypoint. He was temporarily based on a small corvette - nothing as grand as the Star Destroyer.

He entered the pilots' ready room for the first time. It was nothing more than a long hallway lined with hanging TIE pilot regalia, the rows of helmets gazing sightlessly into the near distance. It looked like some planetside trophy case, and Maarek had a momentary vision of some giant creature that collected TIE pilots for sport. He shook off the vision and began to search for the suit assigned to him.

There was only one other pilot in the ready room. He donned the pilot's outfit with practiced ease, and Maarek stopped to observe a moment as the man pulled on the helmet, sealed it carefully to the body of the suit, and then donned his gloves at last. The man turned, as if noticing Maarek for the first time.

"Easy mission," he stated, his voice thin and nasal through the helmet speaker. "Name's Cadrath. You're the new recruit? Steele?"

Maarek nodded.

Cadrath extended a gloved hand, and Maarek returned the gesture. "Better get ready. We launch in just a few minutes. This one here's yours." Cadrath pointed to a suit, indistinguishable from all the others.

Maarek nodded again. "Thanks," he said, and began putting on the gear, oversuit first, then boots, helmet, gloves. Cadrath showed him how to inspect everything first, especially the breathing tubes.

With no life support aboard a TIE fighter, each pilot has to rely on his suit to protect him from the hard death of the vacuum," he told Maarek. "Don't assume anything," he added.

Maarek followed Cadrath from the ready room to the loading bay. In the corvette, the TIE fighter dock was small, and he quickly found the craft assigned to him. It was an older model TIE fighter, scarred and burned from many battles, and Maarek found himself hoping the repair facilities aboard the corvette were well-equipped.

There wasn't time to inspect the craft, so Maarek took a deep breath and climbed aboard, strapping himself in and doing a quick equipment checkout. Then he fired up the engines and allowed the robotic lifters to jockey the small fighter into position over the hatch. A

moment later, he was space borne and felt the exhilaration of weightless flight. Then Cardath came on the com-link.

"Form up with me, Steele. We've got picket duty."

It was an uneventful duty, simply flying around and sensor-scanning various freighters and transports that jumped into the area. Then a group of six ordinary freighters arrived and Maarek fired up his engines, nosing his starfighter over in their direction. He used his target locator to select the first of the freighters and headed directly at it. Flying close to the freighter, his scanners revealed that it was carrying legal cargo - food supplies. Bound for some faroff world, he thought. He used the target locator and turned toward the second freighter.

Everything remained routine until he reached the fifth freighter.

"Weapons!" he called into the comlink. "I've got a load of weapons here."

"Good work, Steele," came the answering message. "Help is on the way."

Just then, the onboard computer registered that several new shuttles had appeared out of hyperspace. These new shuttles did not identify themselves, which was enough evidence of their unlawful intent. Maarek found the nearest one on the target locator and jerked his TIE fighter over in a hard turn.

He came quickly upon the transport, and a visual sighting showed the hated symbol of the Rebel Alliance on its dorsal fin. The Rebel shuttle was slow, however, and after increasing laser recharge rates to maximum, Maarek still was forced to lower engine power to 2/3. He opened fire without delay, staying easily on the shuttle's tail. When he came close enough, the target identification system confirmed the shuttle's identity. He watched the indicator between shots to see how much damage the enemy had sustained.

While he was so engaged, other TIE fighters arrived and there was a confusion of laser blasts from the opposing spacecraft.

"Come on," he urged. He was speaking to his dual-firing lasers, which made extremely slow work of destroying the shuttle. He was anxious to help the other pilots. But the shuttle's shields were strong, and even with supercharged blasts, they held out a long time.

Suddenly the shuttle ahead turned sharply to the right. Another enemy shuttle appeared from behind it, boring directly down on Maarek's unshielded TIE fighter. His threat indicator lit up and he jerked off course in a sharp turn, thinking to avoid enemy fire. But he hadn't counted on friendly fire, and he almost ran directly into the beam of an oncoming TIE fighter who had joined in the pursuit. Only a last minute juke saved him.

He quickly found the shuttle he had been chasing and attached himself to its tail once again. But his hand on the stick was shaking and he could feel the perspiration dripping down his face inside the confines of his helmet. His breathing, too, was ragged. How easy it would be to die in one of these space buggies. Pargo had been right.

In the end, Maarek survived. He shot down three Rebel shuttles as they arrived in successive waves. Only two TIE fighters were lost in the battle, and the Rebels were routed. The squadron commander congratulated the survivors and held a short ceremony for the dead.

Maarek retired to his temporary quarters after the ceremony and sat for an hour with his head in his hands. He had watched one of the Imperial pilots die. His TIE fighter had collided with a Rebel ship and disintegrated. The Rebel ship's shields took a beating, but the shuttle was not destroyed. It was a sobering moment. Maarek realized that the only way to survive as an Imperial pilot was to fly the better craft. There was only one way to get that opportunity. He had to be the best pilot in his squadron. He had to earn the right to be counted among the elite. Because only the elite had any hope of surviving for long.

At that moment, Maarek's vision appeared before him. He saw it as a tunnel stretching off into the future. At the end, a bright light awaited him. Was it an early and explosive death, or would he become a star among the Imperial elite? He pondered the question until he fell asleep. In his dreams, he heard the Emperor's voice,

"Maarek. You have been called upon to join us, to join for the good of all beings , . . You are mine."

Epilogue

Maarek watched the admiral step off his personal shuttle and begin to walk toward the hangar exit. He stepped slowly, apparently deep in thought. After a moment he stopped and looked around. His eyes scanned the room, fixed on Maarek and, for an instant there was no recognition, but that quickly passed.

"Stele!" he called.

"Sir?" the young pilot answered walking up to Admiral Mordon and offering a formal salute - right hand to left breast.

The admiral waved off the salute and smiled. "You've had a taste of the pilot's life. Does it suit you?"

"Sir! I believe it does, sir!"

Mordon laughed. "You've become quite the proper pilot. Steele. But can you still think for yourself? Let me tell you, this galaxy is unkind to those who do not keep their wits about them, and I fear we will see things turned inside out before long."

Of course Maarek had no idea what the admiral was talking about.

"How so?" he asked.

"Ah, young Steele. I smell treachery and deceit. I've survived long in this job because I sense such things. Just as I sense loyalty and dedication and promise. Take my word for it. Not all is as it seems." The admiral seemed to be in a talkative mood, though to Maarek's ear it sounded a little like the musings of a man with something else on his mind. But the admiral wasn't finished yet. "Distinguish yourself in your missions, and you, too, will come to see the pattern of events. Pay attention to all around you and perhaps . . . just perhaps you may command a starship yourself some day,"

"Yessir," Maarek answered. "But what must I do in the meantime?"

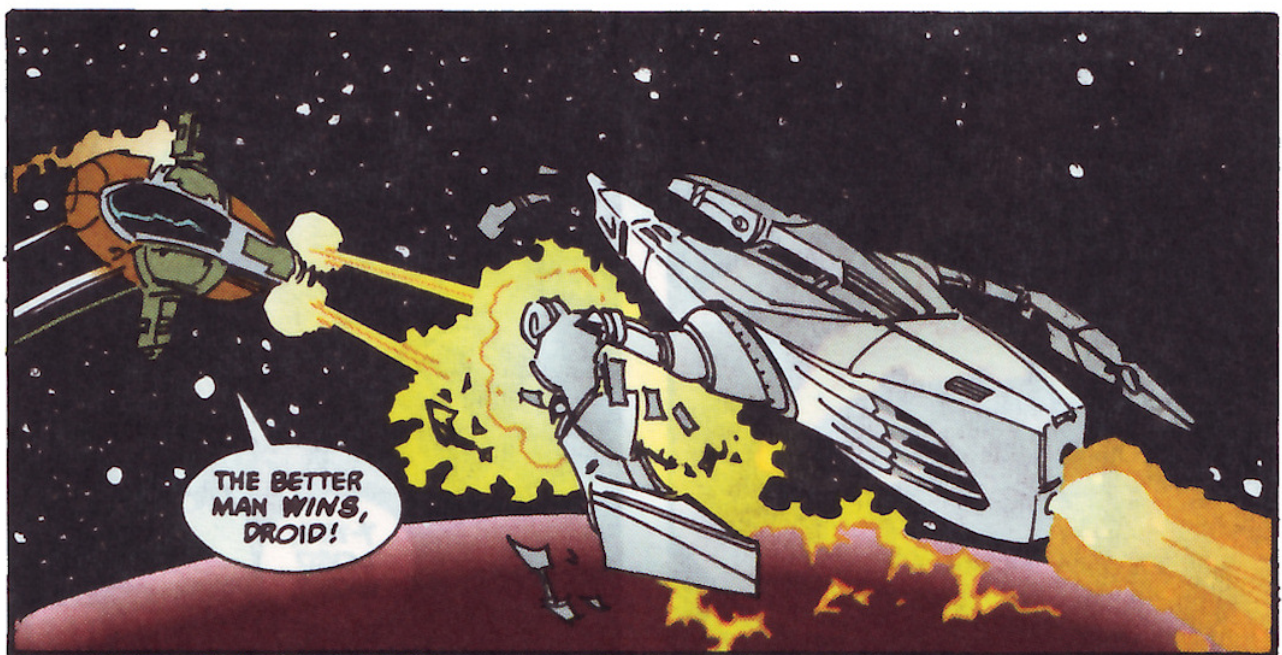
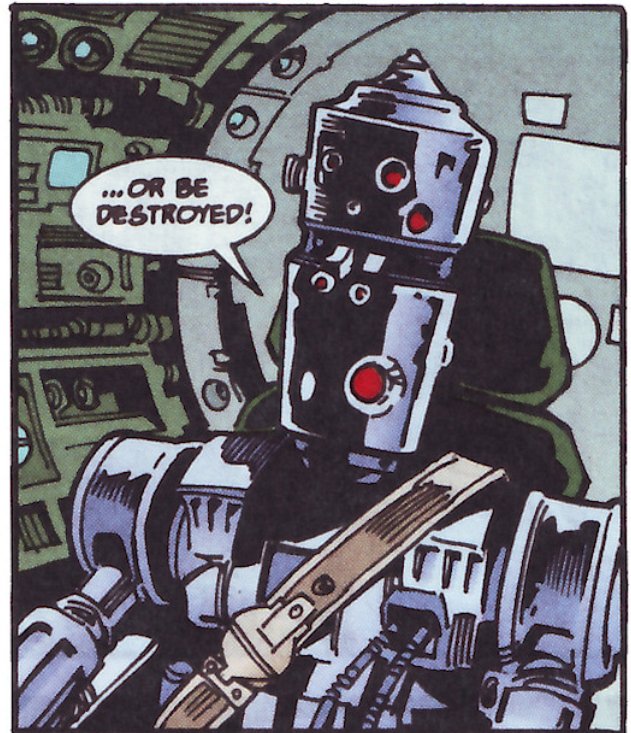
"A good question, pilot. Survive. Destroy the enemy. Follow orders. Fly your tours, win your citations, and keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. Most of all, stay alive. That's critical." This struck the admiral as exceptionally funny for some reason and he burst out laughing.

"Steele, I find you amusing. Come see me any time. My door is always open. Use this password with the orderly, Say, There's a fog over Celadon City, and he'll let you in. Goodbye for now, Steele,"

The admiral turned to walk away, and Maarek heard him still chuckling as he left. Maarek resumed his duties and tried not to think about Mordon.

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE (MICRO MACHINES MINI COMIC)











BOBA FETT!
SURRENDER
YOUR
PRISONER...

...AND YOU HAVE
A THIRTY-PERCENT
PROBABILITY OF
SURVIVING THIS
ENCOUNTER.









Special Ops: Ship Jackers

It was nearly sunup, and activity at the starport seemed to be winding down. Haathi was seated in one of the maintenance towers with her feet up on the viewport rim, surveying the tarmac with a pair of beat-up macros. She was not supposed to be there.

Neither was the new medic, who was making her twitchy, and not in a fun, exciting way.

"Excuse me, Major... Major?" he said, tugging at the sleeve of her coveralls.

Haathi's attention remained fixed on the scene below: messenger droids and automated baggage carts struggled around each other, cranky and argumentative after a long night's work. All around was the coughing and sputtering of transports charging, trying to get up enough juice to pull themselves through another day. Down by the guard towers the security guys were all fidgeting, like their shift was about to be up and their relief would arrive soon.

That last factor was something Haathi was relying on. This was Zelos II, where most of the native population was composed of humanoids who for some reason or other were terrified of night. The guards were more intent on huddling together and watching over their shoulders than on worrying about people who might, say, be about to break the law.

Now Haathi needed to locate the rest of her Special Ops team. She glanced at the nearest lighting tower; Morgan was dangling from the catwalk on a thin strap, her long arms buried to the elbows in an access panel. Right on schedule.

Haathi rested the macros on her thigh for a moment and gazed at the YT-1300 berthed in a high-security docking bay straight ahead. Behind her was a steady clicking; that was the sound of Jayme unplugging data jacks and exchanging c-boards at the security substation. He was completely rewiring the backup security computers to do the team's bidding, courtesy of a set of the starport's remodeling plans. Right on schedule.

"Hey, Major! Maaajor!"

Now she turned around. "What, Nord? What? Whaaat?"

"I've got an issue I want to bring up here, " Nord said, fumbling with one of his stolen tech uniform's gloves.

"Is it that important? I need you to keep your eye on the security patrols. If they make Morgan, this will all be for nothing. "

"I just want to ask you a question. "

"And that is?"

"Why are we doing this?" He said it passionately, like he'd rather spend the morning eating live firebugs than do what Haathi had in mind. Haathi sighed. She had been assured the new guy had been on several wet missions before being assigned to her team, but his hair and fingernails-his whole attitude - told her otherwise. Was the Rebellion really this desperate for field agents?

"We had three days in hyperspace to go over this, Nord, " she said, helping him into his glove. "Would you like me to say this for the eighty billionth time?" She leaned toward him and spoke slowly and quietly into his ear. "Rebellion needs ships. We steal ship. Take home to base. "

He jerked back and turned red. "I know that, " he snapped. "I mean, why that particular ship?" He pointed at the one straight ahead.

"The YT-1300 is a classic, " she told him. "If you had panache, Nord, you would have known that right off. "

"No, I meant-"

"And it's practical, too, Nord. You seem like a practical guy. Don't you think we could use it on Derricon?" Haathi swept her free hand across the viewport. "Imagine how grand it would look in the hangar next to the troop transport. "

"No, I mean why this particular YT-1300? There's dozens of them around here-hey, look, there's two right over there!"

Haathi squinted. "What's so great about those?"

"They aren't located directly underneath the guard tower. "

"Boring, " said Haathi.

Nord gave a weird high-pitched snort; Haathi suspected that his voice was caught between obeying his commanding officer and screaming for help.

After a moment he said, "Fine. Okay. I just want you to know, I think this is a bad idea. "

"Really?"

"Don't you?"

"No, " said Haathi. "I know this is a bad idea. "

"Then why don't we call it off before anybody breaks into anything and, ah... anybody gets, you know, shot?"

"It's too late for that. " Haathi said sadly. "He called to me. "

Nord looked around, over his shoulder, across the bay at the hundreds of ships and thousands of passengers between flights, out at the sky, and back at Haathi.

"Who called to you? 'Master Fate?'"

"Him, " said Haathi. "The ship. "

Nord rolled his eyes.

"It said, 'T'Charek! T'Charek! Save me from these ugly black market nerf-heads! I need a real pilot inside me. I need a rewiring job. "

Suddenly Haathi grabbed Nord by the shoulders. "What am I supposed to say? 'No? Sorry, Ship, but my new med-tech thinks we should get that slag heap to your left because nobody's guarding it and there aren't any security alarms wired to it?' Is that what I should say to that ship out there? Look at him!" Nord didn't look at the ship. His expression was that of a drowning man being thrown an AT-AT and he kept looking at Haathi, who mentally smacked herself on the hand. He's the new guy. Be nice. Be nice. Let's give Rebel Command the benefit of the doubt.

Haathi dusted off Nord's shoulders where she'd grabbed them. "Nord, listen. Don't worry about the other ships. Why don't you watch the security patrols and tell me when they swap shifts, and I'll worry about Haathi-stuff. " Nord studied her. "Define 'Haathi-stuff. ' "

"Everything else. "

"That's what worries me, " Nord whispered.

During the course of the Rebellion, Special Ops teams have been called on to perform numerous assignments-some relatively safe, others exceedingly dangerous. And while each job may hold its own importance in the greater plans of the Alliance, few would succeed if not for the skills and talents of those who perform shipjacking missions. Without a constant supply of ships, the Rebellion would grind to a halt as operatives, information, and critically-needed supplies failed to arrive when and where they were most needed.

Starfighters, freighters and capital ships are the backbone of the Rebellion, but acquiring them is extremely hazardous.

Best suited to this task are the Special Ops teams, whose creative members and risk-takers thrive on the challenge of pocketing yet another vessel. Often it seems the more impossible the odds and the greater the prize, the higher the rate of volunteers to participate in these missions. One has to be highly skilled or mentally unbalanced to join Special Ops, and shipjackers are a little of both. Although the Alliance has the ability to design and manufacture ships, the resources required are limited and focus exclusively on the production of starfighters and capital ships. Defections from the Imperial Navy and planetary defense forces, as well as secret contributions from private concerns, add greatly to the number of ships available to the Rebellion. Still, the entire Alliance Fleet barely equals in number what the Imperial Navy seems to send to the scrap yard in a single year.

Obtaining additional ships legally would bankrupt the Alliance in just a few days, and prove fruitless once the ships were used directly against the Empire. The Bureau of Ships and Services (BoSS) maintains exacting records of ship codes and ownership registrations, making such ships easy to trace and significantly increasing the risks involved in covert operations. Ships can also be obtained via the black market, but again the cost prohibits large-scale purchases. It is up to the Special Ops teams to acquire the ships needed to complete even the simplest missions.

Morgan, the youngest member of the team, figured she was reasonably inconspicuous as long as she acted casual. Certainly, that the starport had been upgraded, it warranted security cameras affixed to every pole, poking out of every orifice, but they were looking for the conspicuous. Anybody seemingly doing a repair job underneath a catwalk did not warrant a security alert. In fact, at this place, Morgan figured, anybody seemingly doing a repair job deserved a medal. Still, the point was to avoid attracting attention; those who glanced her way got a goofy salute in response, and went away grouching about why nobody bothered to screen out the weirdos during the hiring process anymore.

"Morg, " Haathi's voice said over the headset.

"Yeah, Cap'n. "

"Major. It's Major. It's been Major for three months. "

"Sorry, T'Charek. "

"Explain to me what you're doing right now. "

"I'm cutting this wire here. "

"I can't see you, dolt. What's the wire look like?"

"Oh. It's neat. It's bright green. "

Haathi sighed. "I mean what's it attached to. "

"Bright green's the color that hooks into the security monitor video relay. Is the security monitor fuzzing up?"

There was a pause. "Yeah... hey, yeah, you can't see anything. "

"Okay, now I fuse the green wire to the orange wire on my datapad here. In a second the monitors should be displaying our program. " Morgan fused the wires together nice and clean with her spanner.

"Yeah, you did it! This is great!" said Haathi.

"Tell me what you see, " Morgan said.

"The area around the YT-1300. "

"Can you tell it's a computer image?"

"No. Not at all. You did a great job. "

That was it; they could blow the ship up if they wanted to, and the monitors would still show a

YT-1300 completely undisturbed.

"Okay, now, Morg? I need you to... "

"Wait a second!" said Morgan.

"What? What is it?"

"Watch the viewscreen some more!"

There was a pause.

"I'm not seeing anything different. " said Haathi.

Morgan gave a terse sigh. Haathi was smart, but she always looked at the big picture instead of the little important details. "The shadows, T'Charek, the shadows! Watch-as time passes, they move!"

"Oh? Well, that's very-"

"It goes through the whole 20-hour cycle-if you sit there long enough, you can see the night scene! I even put in a stray mynock getting fried by outer forcefield cube!"

"Ah... we only needed 20 minutes. Morgan.... "

"And there's also a moment where-"

"It's great, Morgan, really. It's great. " said Haathi.

"Really?"

"Yes. Now listen. You have three minutes, starting now. "

Morgan pulled her chrono off her wrist and tossed it lightly at the control panel door. The chrono stuck with a heavy, muffled clang. Then Morgan went to work again. This was the easy part. She had the next accessory, a metal tube about twice the size of a standard manual comlink, with a small, flexible plug at each end. Morgan plugged one end of this device into the scomp link; the other end she plugged into a power outlet. Once she had ascertained that the device was secure, she allowed it to charge, and passed the remaining time drinking a cold fizzyglug from her toolbox.

"Morgan. Jayme's ready. "

"Roger that, " Morgan said. She took back her chrono, pulled herself up onto the catwalk. Then she removed a small black box from her utility belt and held it in her palm with her thumb raised, waiting.

Now all she could really do was hope Jayme didn't get killed.

* * *

Jayme wasn't very tall, but he was solid, and he had a "please-don't-talk-to-me" veneer when he wasn't around Morgan and Haathi. Which was why, as he stood in the doorway to the control tower's entrance, right in front of a group of chattering human and droid baggage handlers, he had to struggle to look non-threatening.

Fortunately nobody acknowledged his presence. They hadn't objected when he and the others had gone into the tower, either. The droids knew only that anybody in a green starport uniform, carrying a set of work orders, was allowed to come into the tower and do whatever he or she wanted. The droids' brains figured: uniform-orders-entry-obey. Jayme liked that about droids. He suspected that the human workers' brains functioned the same way.

Then he heard Morgan's raspy voice over the comm-channel.

"I'm ready, " she said.

Jayme stepped onto the tarmac below the viewport. With one hand he scratched at his black goatee, indicating that he was ready, too. His other hand was holding a dinged-up, rust-colored toolbox.

"Jayme?" said Morgan. "You sure you're ready?"

He glanced up at Morgan, who was standing on the catwalk looking down at him.

"Yeah, " Jayme said.

He ambled across the docking bay as casually as time warranted; when he got to just outside the forcefield cube, he set down his toolbox and pulled out a silver rod about a half-meter long. For a minute he studied the forcefield cube, an almost-invisible iridescent shimmer, and the humming mesh-link power fence behind it. Beyond that was a low blast wall. Jayme snorted. Thinking the blast wall would be a deterrent would be like thinking somebody who had stolen your keycards would be put off by an extra door to your house.

"No problem clearing that wall, right?" said Morgan.

"Morg, I told you, I've done this lots a times. "

He meant he had pole-vaulted and free-fallen over walls lots of times, but never through a forcefield area. He didn't tell Morgan that.

"Okay, " said Morgan.

"Now you're clear of the power board this time, right? I mean, way clear?" he asked.

"Because it was just dumb luck that you didn't lose your whole hand last time, young lady. "

"Oh, come on, Jayme. It's not like they weren't able to re-attach my thumb. "

Jayme was about to respond to that when Haathi's voice cut in. "Say, Jayme, anytime this week would be nice. "

The comm-channel went quiet. Jayme took a couple of deep breaths and focused; then he clicked the center switch on his silver rod, and both ends extended a meter apiece.

"Spike it, " he said.

There was a light buzzing noise as Morgan's thumb met the red switch on her little black box, and caused a massive power surge through the main security computer. The iridescent shimmer disappeared and the fence stopped humming. At the same time, there was a popping noise from Morgan's maintenance panel as the power box circuit board exploded. In nanoseconds, the main security computer was crippled, and its automatic cry for backup systems would be answered by the substation Jayme had rewired. Which was to say, it was a cry that would go unnoticed.

Now Jayme had maybe three minutes before the auxiliary power kicked in and the fence and forcefield came back on.

Or he might have a quarter of a second. He put that out of his mind as he slid his hands up to the top of the pole backed up, and then sprinted toward the forcefield area.

* * *

The next time Jayme heard voices over the comlink, he was standing about 30 meters away from the YT-1300. He hadn't heard any buzzing, but there was an iridescent shimmer over his head and the power fence sizzled behind the blast wall. The wall itself surrounded him

and the YT-1300; to get to the ship he would have to cross a wide open area. The only cover was provided by a few big metal crates and a tool shed down at his end. "Well?" said Haathi's voice. "Is that the ship we checked out on the computer?"

Jayme squatted down behind a crate and pulled out his comlink. "Yes. I'm fine, thanks, " he said.

"Jayme-are-you-okay-is-that-the-ship-we-checked-out-on-the-computer?" said Haathi.

"Hang on a second, " said Jayme, peering out. There was nobody else inside with him, and of course Morgan had taken care of the dozen-plus security cameras scattered around the area; but the whole docking bay and its respective defenses were nestled up to one of the starport's perimeter walls. On top of these walls the security guards patrolled back and forth, high enough to look straight down and see everything that was going on across the tarmac.

Not that these guards were going to make a world of difference to Haathi's mission. The ones nearby had their backs to the ship, which meant they were probably split between watching Morgan's computer simulation of the undisturbed ship on the security monitors, or they were just too busy thinking about the shift-change to pay attention. Jayme found, when he crept to the ship, that if he stood closer to the cockpit he was at an angle relatively out of their view.

He had never seen a brand-new stock light freighter before; they were always dingy with carbon-scoring and full of dents. This one was so shockingly clean he felt he had to squint now that he was up close.

He craned his neck to see the pilot's viewport. Just below it there were numbers painted in sharp black; he relayed these numbers to

Haathi.

"I do believe you are looking at our friend The Maker, " said Haathi. "owned by one... let me see here... " There was the distant sound of a datapad beeping. "... Sythluss Leethe. "

Jayme waited until he was back behind the crates before responding. "What kind of name is Sythluss, anyway?" he asked.

"Sluissi. "

"Figures. "

"So, can we come in, too?" asked Haathi.

"Oh," said Jay I guess so. Give me a minute." He found the door on the north wall, opened up its maintenance panel, and affixed a small metal box to one of the c-boards inside This gadget was called the VoiceBox, and Morgan had given him a 20-minute lecture on how it worked; but all he bothered to note was "put it in place and speak into it. "

The door's security system spoke first. "Voice authentication, " it said.

"Me. " said Jayme into the box.

A few seconds later, there was a beeping sound. "Access granted. "

"Shields down, open the door, " said Jayme.

The forcefield cube and power fence turned off again; the door clicked and swung open, and Haathi and the others came inside. Jayme asked the box to put the forcefields back up, then he looked up at the guards. None of them were paying attention.

"Everybody note the guards, " said Jayme.

"We're all going to die, " said Nord, huddling against a crate.

"What's the next course of action, T'Charek?" asked Jayme.

Nobody answered him.

"Er, T'Charek?" said Jayme, looking around. "T'Charek?"

Haathi was standing under the ship, looking upward. On her tiptoes with one arm stretched over her head, she was stroking The Makers underbelly.

"Morgan, " she said slowly into her comlink. "Get this ships defenses down. Right now. "

Jayme suppressed a wide grin.

"Okay, Cap'n, " Morgan said.

Haathi didn't correct her. "Jayme?" she said.

"Yeah. "

"Keep Doctor Paranoid behind the crates and tell him to stay quiet. I need him to watch those guards. "

"Got it. Morg?"

"I'm going. " Morgan made her way over to the ship holding a cluster of tools in her hand like a bouquet. When she got there she pulled open a few ventral maintenance panels and set to work on maker in a blue spray of sparks. Haathi watched from a short distance away, visibly restraining herself from hanging over Morgan's shoulder and asking how much longer it would take. Just then, Jayme heard a hissing noise. It was Nord, crouching in his assigned place about 10 meters behind Jayme. Pssst! Jayme! Would you please talk some sense into Major Haathi? She's going to get us all killed!"

"There's an informed opinion, " said Jayme. To Haathi he said "T'Charek, maybe you wanna give Morgan some breathing space?"

Haathi looked up and grinned at Jayme across the compound "It's ours, you know, " she said. "A couple of seconds and it's ours. "

"Okay, I got it, all defenses are down-" said Morgan.

"Yesss! We are into the soup!" said Haathi. She bounded around to the front of the ship, set a foot on the landing ramp, and was violently thrown backward in a sizzling pink flash.

"- right after I disconnect the stun steps, " said Morgan.

Jayme smacked a palm against his forehead.

"It'll just take another second, Cap'n, " said Morgan, looking around. "Cap'n?"

"She's down!" Jayme said.

"What's going on?" asked Nord.

"Just maintain your position, Nord, " said Jayme irritably. "Morg! T'Charek is lying in the open. Get her clear, now!"

"Hey-is she dead?"

Jayme turned around. Nord was standing right behind him, out in the open, pointing at Haathi.

"Nord, get back to your position. "

"This is my position, " said Nord.

Jayme took a deep breath. "Nooo, " he said. As evenly as he could manage, and as slowly as the situation would allow him. "Your position is behind those crates and out... of... view!"

"Does she need a medic, Mister Expert?" asked Nord.

"I'll let you know in a minute, Nord, now just shut up and get back!" He glanced at Morgan, who had cleanly and efficiently moved Haathi out of the way. He wasn't even sure where Haathi was now.

"Hey!"

Jayme snapped to attention. That was a new voice.

"Hey! What's going on down there! Hey, halt!" shouted one of the men on the wall, pointing at Nord and drawing the attention of his fellow security guards. In quick succession, the outer forcefield and the fence powered down once again and a ladder well shot down the side of the guard wall. Before anybody on Haathi's team could register what was happening, the ladder was swarming with security guards-none of whom even waited for a response before opening fire.

* * *

Haathi couldn't be sure exactly what was going on. What she did know was that there was a lot of noise mixing in with the acrid metallic scent of blaster power packs being unloaded, and that she couldn't feel her legs.

"T'Charek!" said a voice. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Haathi blinked furiously. After a second she shielded her eyes and focused on a hand being held in front of her face. The hand smelled like grease and... fizzyglug?

"Muh-Morgan?"

"How many fingers?" Morgan asked again.

"Autumn, " Haathi replied.

"Close enough. " Morgan scooted away, then reappeared for a second. "Stay where you are, " she said, and left again.

Slay where you are. Haathi wondered where that was. She raised herself up on one arm and realized, after the head-rush had subsided, that she was lying under the ship, fully shielded by the entry ramp. Her legs had now acquired a jangly, throbbing feeling.

Haathi rolled over onto her stomach and got a good look at what was happening. A flood of guards had come off the catwalk. All of them were leftover night-shift guys-twitchy, paranoid, and shooting red kill-shots from their cheap starport-issue blasters. Jayme had taken cover behind the tool shed, and Nord's head popped up from behind a different set of crates every few seconds. The guards were much too wired to concentrate on whether they were actually hitting anyone or not, but in a way that was worse. The tarmac looked as if it were being spattered with pink rain, interrupted occasionally by the odd blue stun bolts from Haathi's team.

At least everyone was okay so far. It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened, or whose fault it was. Snap judgments were one thing, but she certainly knew how to spot a pattern. She sighed heavily and let her head sink down below her shoulders. Scrub the mission. Scrub the YT- 1300. Who needed it, anyway? Whoever thought of naming it the Maker? Stupid name for a stupid ship.

She glanced upward at its white underbelly, its multicolored entrails still hanging out of the compartments Morgan had opened. Haathi stared. Seeing it like that was a kind of blasphemy. It was stuck like that because the guards had called Morgan away from her work.

Haathi's eyes narrowed. There was no way she was going to let a bunch of psycho starport geeks with guns stand between her and the nicest ship she had ever had the privilege of drooling over.

She took out her comlink, which was buzzing and sputtering the sounds of blaster-fire, and with Jayme's voice.

"Jayme!" Haathi said. "Fall back! Everybody on board!"

"Where are you?"

"Behind the entry ramp! Come on, I'll cover you... Morgan, where are you?"

"Aft!" Morgan shouted from somewhere behind Haathi.

"Listen carefully!" Haathi said.

Suddenly the bright-red shot of a hardly used blaster gouged into one of the guards at the top of the ladder and sent him, screaming, to the ground. There was a loud crack. Louder than Haathi would have ever imagined.

"Aaah, no, no, no!" Haathi shouted into the comlink. "Who did that? Take your blaster off 'kill' right now!"

"Only if you get us out of here!" Nord shouted back.

"Jayme, he's hysterical. Stun him, " Haathi said. Jayme smiled sweetly and took a bead on Nord's head, which disappeared instantly behind a crate.

"Okay! It's on stun! Are you happy?" Nord shouted.

"Morgan, you still there?" Haathi asked. "Get the steps disconnected!"

Morgan ducked under the ship, picked up the cables and her tools from the ground, and set to finishing her job.

Haathi could see that the guard count was thinning rapidly: most of the night-shift lay on the ground, stunned, their blaster power-packs long since spent on wild shots into pylons and crates. Still, they weren't entirely stupid. A number of them had retreated back up the heavy wall, where they had a better vantage point than any member of Haathi's team.

Haathi's mind raced. If any of those guards had the presence of mind to sound general quarters-and they would, once the sun rose, or if the day-shift had arrived... and it would, any second now-there wasn't going to be an option of scrubbing the mission or of escaping in the ship.

"Morg, hurry it up, " she called.

"I need those steps down two minutes ago. "

A burst of laser-fire cut off

Morgan's response. Haathi jerked her head over in Morgan's direction; the shot had gone into the now-smoking forward landing gear strut. The security guard who fired the shot stood on the lowest rung of the guards' ladder, his shaking blaster pointed at Morgan. He stepped to the ground.

Morgan stood looking confused for a second. You could see the situation register on her face: panic followed the confusion, and then resignation.

Haathi felt a little sick. If Morgan just moved to the left. Haathi would have the security guard pegged. If not, Haathi was in no shape to get into position and get her shot off first.

Morgan looked at the guard. Suddenly her face relaxed.

"Good morning, " she said. "Fill 'er up?"

The guard's face contorted in a panic. "What?"

"Hold this, " Morgan said, jerking the cables at him. A pink shot into his chest, and then he lay on the tarmac jerking around.

Haathi felt the blood return to her face. She knew what to do now.

"Morgan, the wires! Drop the wires!"

"They're cables!" Morgan yelled back.

"Drop them!" Haathi pointed at the ladder.

Morgan's eyes cleared. She understood, and she let the cables fall onto one of the ladder rungs. A blast of vivid pink shot up the ladder, across the railing and the metal floor of the catwalk on the guard wall. The remaining security guards jolted and dropped in place.

Then there was silence.

That was the last of the night-shift. Jayme peered around the corner of the tool shed, and Morgan came back under the ship, hauling the cables.

"We're clear, " Haathi said into her comlink. "Everybody hurry it up. "

Nord appeared from behind a stack of crates and ran, red-faced like a maniac, toward the ship. His footsteps clanged up the landing ramp over Haathi's head, and in a few seconds she could hear him above her in the ship, still running until he got to where Haathi estimated the storage bay was.

Jayme followed. Instead of heading up the landing ramp, however, he pulled Haathi's arm around his neck and helped her stagger up the ramp. Morgan followed.

Jayme set Haathi on the lounge sofa. "Where's Nord, " he asked, "now that we need him and his medpac?"

"Who cares?" said Haathi. "Get me to the cockpit-"

"Jayme!" Morgan called from the entryway. Jayme tore down the corridor. The sound of blaster-fire followed. The day-shift had arrived.

Great. They would sound general quarters for sure. Haathi yelled down the corridor, "Use the manual override lever to shut the ramp! We don't have time to waste on these guys!"

The blaster-fire grew muffled and distant. In a moment Jayme and Morgan appeared in the lounge.

"Can anybody think, " Haathi asked, "of any other kinds of surprises our boy Sythluss might have for us?"

"No, " said Morgan.

"Good. Get me to the-"

"Unless he put in a cockpit hatch and had it sealed. I'm sure he wouldn't do that, though. "

Jayme grabbed Morgan's sleeve. Haathi pulled herself up against the bulkhead, leaned against a bunch of storage compartments.

She watched Morgan and Jayme run up the main corridor. Sure enough, there was a heavy steel wall blocking their way to the cockpit entrance. Haathi groaned.

"This is no problem, " said Morgan. "Classic smuggler ploy. My dad used to do this in the old days. See, it's just this little hose that keeps the door shut. "

Jayme pulled a gray roll of thick, gummy tape out of one of his pockets, and while Morgan spoke he affixed the tape to the hatch's four sides.

"So, " Morgan said, "to reroute the power, we just-"

"Fire in the hole!" Jayme called. He fired his blaster at the door and jerked Morgan to the ground by her collar. Haathi ducked. There was a loud bang followed by the clang of the door against the bulkhead.

Haathi peered around the corner. Jayme and Morgan, both covered in soot, were getting to their feet, coughing.

"Okay, that works, too, " Morgan said.

Haathi squinted. Way down the passage she could see a dim alcove, half-lit by a few scattered red lights.

It was the cockpit. Her cockpit.

She took a deep breath and then exhaled just as deeply. "Morgan! Jayme!" she said. "Do you smell that?"

They looked at her, at each other, at the smoldering door.

"It's the smell of our brand-new ship!" she shouted, and reeled down the corridor. Before Jayme or Morgan could offer assistance, she was in the pilot's chair.

"T'Charek?" said Jayme from the doorway. "You all right?"

Haathi's voice came over the ship's intercom, clear and ringing. "General quarters, general quarters, " she said. "Testing one, two, three. "

"Hey, neat!" said Morgan, squeezing in behind Jayme.

"And to your left, ladies and gentlemen, you can see half the starport guards attempt to stand up after being stunned into oblivion. To your right, you can see the other half of the guards point their guns and make obscene gestures at our ship. " said Haathi's voice.

"Um, about those security guards?" said Jayme.

Haathi looked over the main console, and then out the viewport. The sky was turning a sickly purple through a thin covering of altostratus clouds. It wasn't going to be the sunniest of days on Zelos. Good. Maybe everybody would wilt or something.

"Morgan. " said Haathi. "Ship is on standby. Suggestion for the fastest possible exit. "

Morgan leaned over her shoulder and studied the console. "Oh. Okay. Don't power up the guns. Don't power up all the shields. Don't power up-"

"Re-route everything into the engines, in other words, " said Haathi, blocking Morgan from getting her sooty hands on any buttons. "Right. "

"Done. " Haathi spoke into the intercom again. "Strap yourselves in, people. And Nord. "

The floor rumbled. Down below, the security guards took withering little pot-shots at the ventral side of the ship and then fell or jumped to the ground, their hands locked over their ears. "Everybody wave. " Haathi said. Morgan and Jayme waved. "Maaajor!"

That was Nord's voice. Haathi glanced at the console; one of the intercom switches had been tripped. "Nord! Wave!" Haathi said.

"Get us out of here, you psychomaniac!" Nord shouted back. "Nord, your problem is, you don't know how to have a good time, " Haathi told him.

She flicked the intercom off-line-Morgan had said reroute everything, after all-and shot past the weak scattering of security air patrols in the Rebellion's brand new stock light freighter.

"Special Ops Teams are where Mission Group members go when they have become '23ers' but are still too young or energetic for a desk job."

— Adison Cray, Free Agent

"I'm too old for a desk job, it appears, so I have to carom around the galaxy like a maladjusted space skeet, too. I have always suspected that I won't be able to retire on health grounds until I've been dead for at least two years, such is the Alliance's need for skilled personnel. Many special operatives are doubtless in the same position. It's not just a job ..."

— Jakob Biddyn, Special Operations
Group Leader

Special Ops : Drop Points

It had started to rain again. Colonel Stijhl knew it, even though he was in his office, because he smelled ozone and shvash gas coming from the hangar, and he wondered vaguely why the blast doors were open.

"Um... Colonel? Something bad just happened. " Stijhl looked up from the cargo manifests and shipping schedules neatly stacked on his desk. Kovings stood in the doorway, fumbling with his headset.

"What is it, Kovings?" Stijhl asked, not really interested. Kovings, who doubled as communications and deck officers, was a high-strung boy who panicked about everything.

"I just gave landing clearance at Ready-One to a light freighter, " Kovings said. "And?"

"It's registered as The Maker. The call-sign belongs to a Major

T'Charek-"

Stijhl dropped his datapad. He finished Kovings' sentence.

"Haathi. "

"That's right. "

Stijhl his neck pulsing. "Sir?" Kovings was white now.

"Yes, Kovings. " The colonel was about to put his head on the desk, but with Kovings watching, he just ran his hands over his thinning crew cut and took a deep breath.

"I should have said 'no' to her request, right?" asked Kovings, backing cautiously towards the door.

"No, it's okay. You shouldn't have said 'no. '" Kovings smiled as if he'd just gotten a field promotion. "You should have opened fire, " said Stijhl.

* * *

Inside The Maker. Morgan was at work in a cramped maintenance alcove trying to fix the power grid. There was barely enough space for her to fit her entire body into the room; she stood almost halfway out the door, staring at the monitors, listening to the whirring sound of some piece of machinery which had activated itself somewhere amidst the crates. Morgan found it relaxing and closed her eyes.

While Morgan stood racking her brains in her own darkness, her life signs were being assessed. The killer amidst the crates prepared to eliminate them.

* * *

"Atten-hut!" Haathi shouted.

At Haathi's order, Jayme exaggerated an attention stance. Nord panicked and did it for real. Stijhl came up the ramp and cringed. "Knock it off, " he said. Haathi offered the Colonel her hand. "Major Haathi, " he said, shaking it. "Major T'Charek Haathi. "

"It's nice to see you again, Colonel. " said Haathi. "Yeah, right. Who did you bring with you?"

"This is my executive officer, Captain Ivhin Jayme. I stole him from the urban commandos. "

Jayme, a dark, wiry man, gave Colonel's hand a solid but brief shake.

"And over here is Exalted Lord Dren Nord of Alliance Grand High Command, " said Haathi.

"Captain Nord. " Nord told him, stepping in front of Haathi. "I'm a doctor. "

"Doctor Nord?" said Stijhl. "Didn't I see you on a Mon Cal cruiser near Ryloth?"

"Yes, sir! I was chief of surgery then. "

"And what are you now?"

"He's my corpsman, " Haathi said.

"You went from being chief of surgery on a capital ship to dusting off these weirdoes?"

Nord went a little pink. "It's always good to test one's limits, sir"

Haathi had already found Nord's. His first mission with the team was acquiring The Maker, and he had nearly gotten everybody killed. But she didn't mention that to Stijhl; the main reason she had come was to show off her promotion and her new ship. Although she was disappointed to find that Stijhl wasn't a major himself anymore.

"Sir. " said Nord, "permission to disembark?"

"Oh, granted. I guess, " said the Colonel. Nord filed past the others and clambered unsteadily down the entry ramp.

Stijhl commenced pacing slowly in front of Haathi and Jayme. "So, " he said, watching his boot-tips as he walked, " Just happened to be in the neighborhood?"

Jayme gave a slight snicker. Stijhl looked up.

"Something funny, Captain?"

"Asthma, " Haathi said, jabbing her elbow into Jayme's ribcage.

Stijhl stopped in front of Haathi and stuck his face right into hers. "Tell me why you came here. "

"Oh, sir. " said Haathi, clasping her hands together, "not the mind-probe!"

"I knew it! You came here to upset me!"

"No, we need supplies! We just got back from an acquisition run. "

Stijhl gave a low sigh. Then he pulled a comlink out of his belt. "Pendower, would you come up here?"

In a couple of moments a dark-haired woman wearing a green day-suit and holding a datapad came striding up the entry ramp. She wasn't much taller than Haathi or Jayme, but with her straight, almost regal posture she fairly towered over the permanently-slouched Stijhl.

"Get me an inventory, Pendower, " he said to her.

"Surely. " Pendower typed rapidly on the datapad.

"This is Major Haathi and Captain Jayme, by the way. Special Ops. "

"Juuust a second. " Pendower said, holding up a finger and still typing with three. "Okay, and what is it you need. Major?"

"We need, ah, some glow rods, " said Haathi.

"Medpacs, " said Jayme at the same time.

Pendower looked up. Her eyes were gray, reminiscent of Gelgelaar's murky atmosphere, but darker, and with a sharpness to them.

"Which is it?" she asked.

"Medpacs, " said Jayme in his deep, smoky voice, as he sat down on the lounge sofa and put his boots on. "And how many of you are there?"

"Four, " said Haathi.

"Four?" asked Stijhl. "I only met three of you. "

"Our techie is working on a faulty power grid. She said to tell you 'hi'".

"Where is your corpsman?" Pendower asked.

"Didn't you pass him on your way into the ship? If you squint, he looks like Mon Mothma in pants. "

Just then Morgan's raspy voice came over the ship's intercom.

"Hey, Cap'n!"

"Morg, for the billionth time. I'm a major. "

"Are you ready for this? Brace yourselves. "

"Yeah, okay. Morg, we're braced. "

"Good, because I think the-"

There was a sharp blast of static from the intercom and the whole ship went dark. Two seconds later, the red emergency lighting kicked on.

"Morgan!" Haathi called. "What just happened?" The intercom was dead. Haathi and Jayme locked eyes for a long, paralyzed second; Pendower shoved past them all and ran clown the corridor toward the rear maintenance bay. Jayme looked down the corridor after Pendower. "Go, " Haathi told him. "I'll get Nord. "

* * *

Maglenna Pendower's heart knocked so hard against her chest that her arms shook. Near the power core, the red lighting was in a permanent flicker-combined with the hot smell of the various metals and oils, it gave the illusion that something was on fire. She took a deep breath, stepped into the maintenance alcove, and glanced around.

It was a very small room with big, looming crates taking up most of the space. To Maglenna's right was a steel wall studded with monitors and glowing fixtures, many of them drizzling sparks. She glanced at the schematic on her datapad-yes, that's the power grid. Just as she confirmed this, she extracted the smell of burnt flesh from the other odors in the room, and caught sight of Morgan.

It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened: Morgan had been electrocuted by the grid and thrown against the bulkhead. At the moment, she was lying over the grillwork on the floor, clutching a half-melted hydrospanner.

Maglenna reached around the doorway and pulled a grounding rod out of its emergency box on the wall. "Morgan?" she said, gently tapping Morgan's shoulder with the insulated rod. "Are you all right?"

Maglenna's red reflection peered back from Morgan's welding goggles. The display at the tip of the rod said "negative"; Maglenna tossed it aside and palpated Morgan's cartoid pulse with her bare hand. Nothing. She had expected this, but her stomach lurched all the same. The girl couldn't even be twenty years old yet.

Maglenna got halfway out of the alcove with Morgan before Jayme appeared at the bulkhead door and took over. He pulled Morgan out into the repair bay, ripped her jacket open, and immediately started pumping at her chest. "Get help. " he told Maglenna.

"I'm it, " she said, pulling her medic ident-card out of her sleeve pocket.

Jayme looked up and focused on the card without stopping what he was doing.

She said. "Get me a medpac with a defib strip and a scanner. You can find one at the north end of-"

Jayme nodded at the locker array, at the base of which sat a deluxe medical backpack.

Maglenna absently retrieved it. Hadn't they said they needed...?

The scanner confirmed her suspicions-ventricular fibrillation. No point in arguing about medpacs. Maglenna peeled off Morgan's goggles and got the pressure resuscitator affixed to Morgan's face, held her jaw open while the decompression tube automatically located her trachea and fed into her lungs.

"Okay, " Maglenna said, affixing an adrenaline patch to Morgan's neck and offering Jayme a thin package with her free hand. "This is an adhesive defib strip. It 's got to conduct a signal across her chest, from this shoulder to just over the heart. Put it on her and get clear. "

Jayme peeled the strip off its backing and positioned it where Maglenna had indicated. The two of them scooted away as the device activated itself. An electric signal shot through Morgan's body, and she convulsed once. Twice. Three times. Four.

The light on the side of the resuscitator turned green

"She's breathing on her own, right?" Jayme asked.

"You mean it worked?" Maglenna said, incredulous.

Jayme's dark eyes bore into her. "Haven't you done this before?"

"Of course. " On a simulator, but she didn't mention that, Jayme didn't press the issue; he was suddenly fascinated by something on Morgan's left wrist.

"I got him!" shouted Haathi, who came running through the bulkhead door. She stopped cold on seeing the situation.

Jayme held up his hand. "It's okay, T'Charek. We got a pulse. "

Maglenna held Morgan's head steady while the decompression tube retracted itself. Behind her, she could feel Haathi, watching, assessing, judging. A security trooper jostled her way into the repair bay, bearing medpacs and a repulsor sled.

"Need some help, " Maglenna said loudly.

A thin, scrubbed young man emerged from the deep red shadows of the repair bay door. "I'm here. You can relax now. "

"Oh, " said Maglenna. She squinted. "You must be Nord. "

"None other. " He edged Maglenna out of the way and descended on Morgan, the trooper following his lead. In short order they ascertained that Morgan had fractured a collarbone and three ribs but not her spine, loaded her onto the sled, and quickly exited the ship.

Haathi and Jayme seemed to want to follow, but instead they turned to Maglenna, who was leaning uncomfortably against the bulkhead. Haathi's black eyes studied Maglenna's face for a long time.

"I thought you were a clerk, " Haathi said. Her voice was steady, but very quiet.

"Not by choice. " said Maglenna evenly.

"Pendower is your name?"

"Call me Maglenna. "

Maglenna, would you please make sure Nord doesn't extract Morgan's heart and donate it to science?"

Maglenna blinked. Haathi's tone had not changed at all. "What?"

"I just mean, go make sure he's doing his job right. " There was no malice in Haathi's tone. Beyond the wry remark, there was just a professional cool.

"Certainly, Major, " Maglenna said.

Haathi's eyes finally diverted their attention to Jayme, who was rummaging loudly through one of the lockers.

"What's with you?" she asked him.

"Going to find out who did this to Morg. " he said.

"Nobody did anything. " said Maglenna. "It was an accident. She probably stumbled into the power grid. Captain, you saw how obvious it was. "

"No, " Jayme said, pulling two heavy blasters out of the locker and dropping them into their respective holsters. "I didn't. "

* * *

Morgan drifted through various levels of consciousness, but Maglenna couldn't make sense out of anything she was saying. They were in the medical supply cubicle: serious injuries

were intended to be transferred to the nearest medical frigate, which meant that there were no bacta tanks for the odd disaster. So the only thing standing between Morgan and death was a quilted antishock blanket riddled with wires and sensors, a digital life-sign readout housed in one of the quilt squares near her heart, and dumb luck.

Maglenna sat next to Morgan's cot. Now that Nord had left, everything was almost oppressively quiet. It gave Maglenna too much time to think about everything that could have gone wrong. Would Jayme and Haathi blame her if Morgan died? Then again, hadn't they thanked her, in their own strange way?

The thought of Jayme brought something else to mind. Maglenna took hold of Morgan's bandaged left hand and examined the wrist. Sure enough, something was there—a thin, reddish welt, totally unrelated to the electrical shock.

Suddenly Morgan's fingers twitched, and her eyes opened.

Pendower held Morgan's hand. "Morgan? Can you hear me?"

"Whu-?"

"Everything's all right. You're at the Alliance drop point on Gelgelar—"

"I'm not the Maker, " Morgan said thickly.

"What?"

Morgan repeated it several times, and then slipped back into an incoherent mumble. Maglenna stared blankly at the digital readout. Of course Morgan's system was saturated with drugs, and Maglenna gathered from Nord that Morgan didn't make much sense even when she was healthy. Nonetheless, Maglenna knew one context in which "the Maker" meant something other than the ship, and if this had anything to do with Morgan's current state, Maglenna didn't want to think about what Jayme was going to find.

* * *

Jayme stood underneath The Maker, staring at the landing pad, listening to the sounds of droids and workers bustling around the warehouse. The logical path of Morgan's assailant had taken him through the engine compartment escape hatch and down to the around. There was an open floor grating two meters to his left.

Jayne got down on his belly and slid headfirst into the opening. Presumably this led to a maintenance tunnel. He bent in half at his torso, braced his legs on the landing pad, and dangled there for a second while his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Except the crawl space wasn't totally dark. There was a glow emanating from a distant pair of red lights. Jayme thought they were part of a control panel until they disappeared around a corner. It occurred to him that he might jump down and follow the lights, but then he thought better of it. He stood up, jumped off the landing platform, and snatched a base schematic placard hanging from one of the control panels. For a moment he studied the placard; then he jogged across the landing bay in the direction the lights had been heading.

At that moment, every light in the warehouse went out.

Jayne stopped dead. A half-second later the backup lights kicked on, bright, cheap lumas that left parts of the warehouse starkly lit and other parts in deep shadow.

Oh, no, no, no.

He sprinted across the hangar, nearly tripping over his feet. It wants to trap us in here with it. If it gets to the hangar door controls we 're all dead.

Suddenly he was there, standing at the control panel, ripping open the yellow-striped maintenance cover and absorbing the control schematic on the inside. With the power out, the whole system would have to be prepped before the doors could be opened manually. Two large levers disengaged the hydraulic braking system, and made horrible ratchety noises as he pulled them down: and then there was a massive clang from the hangar doors as the braking pins popped out of their slots.

"Okay, " Jayme said quietly to himself, wiping his sweaty hands on his pants, "manual override, manual override. "

The layout was not well-mapped, Jayme wished Morgan were there. She could have had the doors open in two seconds and drawn a better control schematic on the back of a candy wrapper,

Thinking about Morgan cleared his head. He found the black switch that would depressurize the automatic hydraulics and engage the manual systems. Then, with much effort, he locked the unit's auxiliary power cylinders in place, and finally got his hands on the giant lever that would unlock the hangar doors.

He would have pulled it, too, except that his own shadow suddenly rose in front of him, and a tiny red spot appeared on the panel slightly to his left.

Before the spot could position itself at the back of his head, before there was the sound of blaster-fire, before the whole panel exploded, effectively locking everyone inside. Jayme was up a length of cable chain, halfway to the second level. Below him he heard the beeping of his assailant, a small, sleek assassin droid.

And he and his crew had brought it here.

* * *

Haathi threw a datapad against the bulkhead, having spent the past twenty minutes trying to understand Morgan's notes on the power grid malfunction. Just as she considered jumping up and stomping on the pad, there was a tapping at the doorway.

"Major?" said Colonel Stijhl. "I thought you'd like some help. "

"That's nice of you, sir, but do you know anything about circuit boards?"

"Not a thing. That's why I brought you a real engineer. "

She squeezed in past the Colonel, a meek female Sullustan wearing matted furs and carrying a tool box. Haathi got out of her way. "This is Sergeant Nofre Ecls. She's one of our undercover opera-tives - she runs the Nofre Repair Bay. " said Stijhl. "Don't tell her brother He doesn't like Rebels much. "

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. "

"Don't get teary-eyed or anything. I have four other ships that are going to need this hangar today, you know. "

"Speaking of which, is your hangar always this noisy? Sounds like you've got a riot going on outside. "

"You wish. It sounds to me like a freight droid crashed into a pylon. Probably nothing. "

"It's never nothing, sir. "

"Not with you people around, " said Stijhl, and he exited the ship.

* * *

Up the chain, through the second-level rail, on hands and knees, standing up now, running, leaping over a pile of boxes, running, running. Jayme remembered the obstacle course at the Imperial training base on Merikon, so difficult when he was a teenager. It hadn't occurred to him back then to be grateful that he wasn't being followed by a custom-made assassin droid. He could hear its repulsors whining behind him, pictured it hovering above the ground floor, slipping between the rails, gliding along behind him. The thought made Ms back prickle, and his heart felt as though it might explode.

Take it easy Don't go crying about it yet.

He swung his blaster around and fired. The red bolt sputtered uselessly off the droid's shielding.

Okay, now you can cry.

At least the droid was slower than he was. Moreover, Jayme realized as he approached a stairwell, he had gotten a great running start. And running starts were perfect for one thing.

Jayme leaped over the stairwell edge and caught onto one of the metal steps above his head. An instant later, a yellow blaster-bolt hit the floor where his feet had been. By the time a second shot went off, Jayme was pulling himself up the back of the steps, hand over hand.

As soon as Jayme hoisted himself up to the railing, a barrage of shots went up the front of the steps in anticipation of his next move. But he didn't leap onto the steps. Instead, he dropped back down to the second level floor, on the opposite side of the stairwell. The droid stopped its barrage, confused. That bought Jayme enough time to simply run right up the steps. Jayme's head pounded. What's upstairs? What can I use? The answer came in a sick flash. The rafters were upstairs, and once he got there he'd have nowhere to hide.

* * *

The Sullustan was working diligently at the power grid, with the main circuit board tucked under her arm. The grid was still smoking a little; it brought the smell of burned flesh to

Haathi's attention. She's alive. Don't think about it. "What's the situation?" Haathi asked. "The master circuit board is fried, " Nofre told her. "I know that. Tell me about the power grid. "

"The, uh, the power grid is also fried. "

Haathi had to stop a moment to keep herself from yelling. It's not her fault. "Could you please be more specific?"

"I need to rewire the whole thing. "

"What?" Haathi shouted. Nofre shrank back against the bulkhead.

Haathi cleared her throat. "I mean, uh, that appears to be a taller order than you're making it sound. "

"No, ma'am, it'll just take a few days. "

"I want my techie aboard a medical frigate by this time tomor-row. "

"Sorry. Can't be done. "

"Come on. There must be a way. "

Nofre firmly shook her head.

"Couldn't we just hotwire the main engine to the power core?"

"You wouldn't want to do that. "

"Why not?"

"You'd be flying without any safeguards. "

"What does this mean, 'safeguards'?"

"One power spike and the whole ship would blow. "

Haathi felt a mad rush of relief. "Is that all?" she yelled, incredulous. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

Nofre's eyes widened. "Colonel Stijhl told me not to. "

"Boy, you're boring. Tell you what. You hotwire the power core and I'll rewire the main c-board. "

The Sullustan held the c-board tightly to her chest. Haathi leaned in toward her. "Sergeant. " she said, and added the three words she almost never used: "That's an order. "

* * *

Colonel Stijhl had stepped out of The Maker into chaos. Kovings had run up to him with a breathless report about the hangar doors being locked shut, comm channels being jammed and several dead technicians in the forward maintenance pit. Around Stijhl, the warehouse's limited security force was firing blindly toward the ceiling lights, underneath which a shadowy object was chasing some-one across the rafters.

Then the explosions started. Massive stacks of crates on the west side of the hangar blew up and the ones with flammable contents caught fire. Tan-suited loaders came howling out into the open. From above there now came a salvo of blaster-fire, every single shot hitting home.

Stijhl, ducking behind a pylon, gaped as his people fell in quick succession. When the firing subsided, more crates began exploding, sending another flood of fresh targets into the open.

"Take cover!" the Colonel screamed. Some of them heard him and tried to find a safe place between the blazing supplies and the enemy's kill-zone.

"Sir!" somebody called as more blaster shots rained down. "Shouldn't we evacuate?"

Stijhl recognized Haathi's corps-man. "Nord, get Haathi! We need that ship going right now, do you understand? Get everyone on board that ship!"

Nord might have heard him, but Stijhl wouldn't know because at that moment he felt a burning across his back, and then nothing.

* * *

"Hey, loser!" Jayme called.

The droid stopped firing. Now that it was facing him, Jayme could finally get a good look at the thing: its snakelike body hovered over the girder, swaying gently back and forth as its flat head pivoted to face him. It looked very much like a metallic Sluissi. Except that it didn't have the sheen of normal metal; reflections seemed to melt off of it like random images washing across a monitor.

Jayme launched his own attack virtually point blank. Multiple shots from both blasters, a shrieking noise, a searing across his hands as the droid's shields sparked and collapsed. Then something black launched at him.

Jayme was at the end of the girder near the fourth-level catwalk. In a second he was over the catwalk guardrail, took a fast step toward the stairwell, and hoisted himself up, the balls of his feet balanced on the stair rails. Looking back, he saw what had erupted from the droid: a pair of whiplike tentacles. He dropped his guns, hurled himself into a backflip off the rails, and landed on the beam directly behind the droid.

A second too late, the droid tore the rails apart with its tentacles. Before it could turn around and lash out at him, Jayme dove back over the rail and onto the catwalk, so close to the droid that it was startled. He scuttled away on hands and knees, then staggered to his feet.

Below him, The Maker made occasional dead-start noises. He thought of Haathi and Morgan—warm, safe images. Suddenly his legs were jerked out from under him. He was falling, splintering noises in his ears and dust in his eyes, something cold wrapped painfully around his ankles. Then he stopped.

Jayme hung there for a moment, dizzy. Blood pumped into his head: everything was dark. He recalled seeing an open shaft covered by a length of plastiboard as he'd gotten to his feet—he must have fallen through. The droid wasn't strong enough to pull him out or smart enough to let him go. But he found himself wondering, as his limbs drained of sensation, just how strong the tentacles actually were.

He was answered by the sound of metal snapping and a falling sensation.

When he landed, Jayme shifted; shards of plastiboard slid off his back and a dull pain spread from his shoulder to his pinkie. He rose slowly, felt a yanking pain in his shoulder and the warm rush of blood draining from his head back into the rest of his system.

Plastiboard had broken his fall at each level until he'd hit the ground floor. The droid was nowhere in sight. He didn't see his blasters lying around on the floor, or buried in the

splintered plastiboard. He decided the best thing was to keep moving. Clambering over a mountain of red metal crates, he got a good look at the carnage-the floor was covered with trashed repulsor sleds, charred B-1 loading droids, and human bodies Giving off the overwhelming scent of blood iron and burned flesh. Techies and officers and loaders spilled out of dark corners of the warehouse, thumping across the floor and up the ship s entry

The Maker, however, still couldn't get itself started.

Jayme spied a clutter of tools down on the other side of the crates He took a deep breath and clambered down into the unbearable heat and rummaged around until he found a pair of hull cutters.

"Captain!"

A female voice, ragged from coughing. He looked up, blinking in the hot, shimmering air. Maglenna Pendower was right in front of him, stooping over as she tried to manage the awkward load of an extinguisher in one hand and half-conscious Morgan hanging off her opposite shoulder.

"Maglenna! Are you all right? Have you got her?" Maglenna replied by swinging the extinguisher at him. Jayme was so surprised that he didn't get the chance to move before she bashed his legs out from under him. He felt the agony across the leg that had taken the brunt, bile rising in his throat.

As he choked it down, an energy blast ricocheted off the floor. Then he saw the sleek metal serpent hovering over the crates, shredded black cables dangling from it like intestines. From that angle the blast would surely have taken his head right off... had he been standing.

Jayme felt a massive surge of adrenaline. The droid swooped down at his face but Jayme's hull cutters came right up to greet its underside. There was a ripping sound followed by a shower of sparks, and Jayme rolled out of the way before the thing could land on his head.

The droid screamed, its repulsor unit destroyed, its broken, stubby whip-ends lashing uselessly out at nothing as it fizzed and sparked violently on the floor. Jayme was up on his good knee now, the cutters still in his hands. He just started pummeling.

He didn't know what parts of the droid he was hitting, but he felt it denting under each blow, soft metal that nobody was supposed to get remotely close to.

"Yeah, you feel that? What's it like? Huh? You want some more? Take it! Drink it in, love it, yeah, it's pain, that's what you give and that's what you get!" The droid stopped moving, but he kept hitting it, screaming at it, until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I think you killed it. " said Maglenna.

Jayme looked down, panting. Its picturesque grace was gone; it didn't look like a Sluissi anymore, or even a droid. The swirling electromagnetic paint was half beaten off and looked tacky instead of mysterious. Jayme felt a throbbing in his shoulder, and with it a pang of disappointment; he had expected the droid to drag him to his last breath, to expire right after he heard its own final noises.

The sound of Morgan coughing brought him back to attention. He came up underneath her with his good arm, put his weight on Maglenna while helping her support Morgan at the same time. He leaned over and spit onto the killer's remains.

That was when he noticed the readout in the smashed torso unit.

01: 35

01: 34

01: 33

"Oh, no, " he said.

* * *

"Listen up, " Haathi called over the sounds of moaning and chattering. "Somebody have a roster or something? Do we know who's here?"

"I think this is everybody, Major. " one of the loaders said. Almost everybody.

"Who has piloting experience?" she asked. One of the green-suits did. Haathi sent him up the cockpit, told him to take off once the engines turned over. Then she picked her past the sweaty, bleeding bodies crammed in the corridors and the floors, and stood at the open entryway. At that moment she despised being a commanding officer, The warehouse was clouded in a swirl of black smoke and flames with strange chemical tints to them. The smell burned the back of Haathi's throat, made her eyes sting, but she didn't move Come on.

A massive figure came hobbling out of the smoke. No, two figures, one slung over the other's shoulder. Haathi came down the ramp a short way and helped Nord get the Colonel inside the ship. "Morgan? Jayme?" she asked Nord. "Didn't see them, " he said.

The ship listed as its repulsorlifts came to life. Haathi remained steady.

Then they emerged, covered in soot and blood-three people trying desperately to help each other run but only managing a collective, crippled lope. Haathi stumbled to the end of the ramp, choking back toxic fumes and tears, pulled Morgan off of Jayme and Maglenna and carried her back up. Somebody in a tan uniform met her halfway and took Morgan inside.

The Maker lifted a meter off the floor. Haathi fell onto the closing ramp. She grabbed a support strut and heard the scuffling noises of Maglenna and Jayme. When she steadied herself she saw Jayme lying at the end of the ramp, breathing hard. One of his legs was soaked in blood; his face wasn't registering pain, but his body was nearly curled into the fetal position and he looked as though he didn't have another movement left in him.

Nonetheless he got himself turned around and thrust out his hand to Maglenna, who was still on the ground. Haathi threw herself down to the edge and grabbed Maglenna's other hand.

The ramp closed. The three of them were inside, coughing, their clothes wet and reeking of chemical smoke. The Maker smashed into the hanger doors with such a horrible sound of wrenching metal that Haathi's vision darkened, and she thought she saw the walls of her ship buckle and twist. Before she could focus. The Maker rocked violently as the assassin droid blew itself and the warehouse into white-hot oblivion.

* * *

When Stijhl finally felt like dealing with Haathi's team, he had them gather around a table in one of the medical frigate's large white utility rooms.

He spoke in measured tones. "Major. I'd really love to hear your explanation for why we lost an entire warehouse full of equipment. "

"A case of mistaken identity, " said Haathi calmly.

"What?"

"Tell him. Morg. "

Raventhorn sat up straight and put her hands on the table, as if she were about to outline a major battle strategy. "Well, sir, first you got to picture something. Are you picturing?"

"Get on with it. "

"Picture us all on Zelos II, stealing The Maker. "

"Wait, " said Haathi. "What am I wearing?"

"Major-" said Stijhl.

Morgan said, "We've got a limited time, so the only thing we really check out is the background of the ship and who it belongs to Sythluss Leethe. We don't actually look up Leethe's back-ground So I did some checking here, and you know what he does for a living?"

"I'm afraid to-"

That's right-he's a droid manufacturer! Serving the under-world with quality merchandise for over twenty years. So when we take off with his ship, we're also taking off with his latest project, designed to off some bounty hunter or a Hutt or somebody gross like that. "

"Anyway, the droid must have been on a timer and activated itself shortly before we landed. Its basic purpose was most likely to wipe out a secure area and terminate the life-signs of those it came into contact with-like me-as well as anyone who tried to inter-fere with its agenda-like Jayme. When your people opened fire on it, guess it declared open season on everything that moved. And in the end, even though Jayme beat it, it succeeded in its mission parameters anyway. "

Haathi spoke. "All in all, we're pretty lucky. " Stijhl pretended to clean out his ear. "What? What was that word? Maybe you should listen to the damage assessment. " He leaned out the door. "Pendower, get in here!" Maglenna entered and handed him a datapad. Stijhl began reading. "Six industrial grade power generators, 600 Held medpacs, 82 perimeter sensors, eight B-1 worker droids, 200 blaster packs... shall I go on?"

"One warehouse. " added Haathi.

"Just keep it up, Haathi, it won't save you from what's coming next. "

"Which is what?"

"You're going on an acquisition run for me. "

"What for?"

"Six industrial grade power generators, 600 field medpacs, 82 perimeter sensors, eight B-1 worker droids. 200 blaster packs... shall I go on?"

Haathi studied the colonel. "I'll need some supplies. "

"Like what?"

"One medic. "

"You have a medic. "

"Not really. "

"Hey!" said Nord.

"Come on. Nord, you like the Colonel, don't you?" She turned to Stijhl. "He saved your life, didn't he? Even purged your office data files for you after you went down?"

"What are you getting at?"

"You get Nord and we get Maglenna. " Stijhl looked at Nord, who shrugged. "Anything would be an improvement, sir. "

"Pendower?" said Stijhl. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes, sir. " said Pendower. "I discussed it with Haathi's team. "

"She's qualified, " Jayme said. "Obviously. "

Stijhl gave a heavy sigh. The red tape was going to be murder, getting her transferred into Special Ops. Somehow that was nothing in the face of sitting in the room with Haathi for another moment.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"No, sir, "" said Pendower. "We'll also be needing those medpacs Major Haathi requested earlier. "

"Take one. Take fifty. Go. Leave. Dismissed. "

Haathi took the Colonel's hand and shook it. "A pleasure as always, sir, " she said, and then turned to her crew. "Let's be off, boys and girls. "

They strolled out. Nord trailing behind them. Stijhl put his head on the desk and stared at the floor. Someone came into the room. "Sir?"

"What is it, Kovings?" asked Stijhl without lifting his head.

"It's not too late to shoot them. "

A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY...

REBEL SPIES HAVE LEARNT OF A CONVOY OF UNMANNED IMPERIAL DRONE FREIGHTERS, EN ROUTE TO THE KUAT DRIVE YARDS. PACKED WITH A CARGO OF HYPERDRIVE COMPONENTS — VITAL TO THE FUTURE OF THE REBELLION — THE ALLIANCE MOUNTS A DARING MISSION TO INTERCEPT ONE OF THOSE FREIGHTERS.

FOR MISSION COMMANDER LUKE SKYWALKER, IT IS NOT LONG SINCE HIS TERRIFYING CLOUD CITY BATTLE WITH SITH LORD DARTH VADER...

PREPARING TO DROP OUT OF LIGHT SPEED.

THE SMALL REBEL ASSAULT SHUTTLE DROPS OUT OF HYPERSPACE, PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO A DRONE FREIGHTER.

NICE FLYING, WEDGE. RIGHT ON TARGET.

WHOAH! MUCH CLOSER AND WE WOULDN'T NEED A DOCKING CLAMP.

DRONE ALONE

WRITER CHRIS COOPER • ARTIST BOB MOLESWORTH, AND COLOURS BY DIGIKORE • LETTERER: DAVID LEACH

BUT CLOSE ENOUGH TO DODGE THE ESCORT FRIGATE'S SENSORS. I HOPE.

HEY, ARE YOU OK?

I'VE BEEN BETTER.

SKYWALKER TO RAPTOR SQUAD: WE'RE DOCKED. BLOW THE HATCH.

STAY SHARP. YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

GRRRONK!!

THE REBELS SPLIT UP.

CHEWBACCA AND LANDO MUST BYPASS THE DRONE FREIGHTER'S COMMAND RELAY...



...ALLOWING LUKE AND WEDGE TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE HELM AND WEAPONS SYSTEMS. ONLY THEN CAN THEY RISK BREAKING AWAY FROM THE CONVOY AND MAKING THEIR ESCAPE.



BUT, ABOARD THE CONVOY'S ESCORT FRIGATE...

SIR,
SENSORS DETECTED
SOMETHING NEAR DRONE
VESSEL 171

BUT IT
DISAPPEARED
ALMOST
IMMEDIATELY.

WE THINK
IT WAS JUST AN
ECHO...

NO. THIS
IS THE MOMENT WE'VE
BEEN WAITING
FOR.

THE REBELS
HAVE MADE THEIR
MOVE.

JUST AS
LORD VADER
PREDICTED.



TRANSMIT THE
COMMAND SIGNAL.
I DON'T IMAGINE THOSE
REBEL SCUM WILL
BE EXPECTING
COMPANY.





BUT LANDO MAKES AN UNWELCOME DISCOVERY...

UH OH.
SOMETHING
TELLS ME THAT'S NOT
THE STENARDESS
SERVICE.

LUKE, WE'VE GOT
A RAT INFESTATION.
OF THE IMPERIAL KIND.
IT'S A TRAP!

THEY
MUST'VE BEEN
WAITING FOR
US.

I'M ON
MY WAY. STAY
OUT OF TROUBLE
UNTIL I GET
THERE.

THAT'S
EASY FOR YOU
TO SAY...

STORMTROOPERS.
HEADED FOR THE FLIGHT DECK.
GOT TO STOP THEM.

HALT,
REBEL!

BUT
WHAT IF
I'M NOT
READY...?!

Continued
on
page 22



LANDO MAKES SWIFT USE OF HIS PROMOTION...



YOU THERE. FOLLOW ME.

SIR? WHERE TO?



THE AFT DOCKING BAY. THE REBELS ARE HIDING OUT IN THERE.



BUT WE HAVE ORDERS FROM COMMANDER TRANEEL TO...



THIS IS A FLUID COMBAT SCENARIO, SOLDIER.

FOLLOW MY ORDERS OR, SO HELP ME, I'LL SEE YOU REPRIMANDED BY THE EMPEROR HIMSELF.

SNAP TO IT.

SIR.





STARFIGHTERS DOWN

As the image of Commander Fenris came into being at the center of the holotank, a hush fell across the room. Despite the fact that he was actually in his ship high above the planet, his presence seemed to fill the hall. With a glint in his precise gray eyes, he began to speak.

"Comrades," he began calmly, "some two weeks ago the forces of Commander Skywalker engaged a large Imperial fleet near Bespin. The intended target was the Super-class star destroyer Enforcer, flagship of Admiral Kohrin and his second fleet."

He paused, and a murmur of expectation swept across the assembly. News of Commander Skywalker's exploits was always welcome. But the brief feeling of hope faded quickly when Commander Fenris began his next sentence.

"Unfortunately, the arrival of additional Imperial forces turned the tide of battle at the last moment, and Commander Skywalker was forced to order his fleet

to withdraw. Enforcer, though badly damaged, was not destroyed." Sounds of disappointment quickly fell away as Fenris broke into a thin, smug smile.

"While Enforcer limped to Phaylenn for repairs, her escort fleet joined forces with that of the newly arrived Imperial fleet to lead a devastating counter strike against rebel positions in the Ahlenn system." Laughter filled the room as each and every one of them recalled the hectic evacuation of Ahlenn two months ago. When the Imperials arrived there, they would find nothing but empty tunnels and a small abandoned fighter base.

"While our Imperial friends are busy bombing us out of existence, Enforcer sits almost helpless above Phaylenn. Like a proverbial sitting duck. As you may have guessed, we have been ordered to head at once to Phaylenn and engage the Enforcer again. This time, she won't be as lucky as she was before."

A loud cheer raced across the room, and it was several minutes before Commander Fenris' attache could continue with the operational details of the briefing.

JET PACKS

Bret "No Fret" Hanson walked slowly down an alley in downtown Rakati. He was unwelcome, and he knew it. But before he left, there was one thing he had to settle. In front of him stood his foe, Nik, a traitor to the Rebel cause. Hanson was ready with blaster at side. Nik smiled wickedly as he pulled a hand-sized sphere off his bandolier.

"A thermal. I haven't messed with one of those since a skirmish on Tensor IV about a year and a half ago," Hanson thought, "and I don't want to start now."

Too late. Nik had already pitched the thermal detonator. He showed an odd sense of delight as it landed solidly next to Hanson's left foot. Although 25 meters is a pretty safe distance to be away from one of those things, Hanson knew that he could not run that far in the approximately 10 seconds until it detonated. But Hanson wasn't one to fret. He cleared his mind and set his jet pack for two bursts.

LUNAR SURFACE STATION

"Okay, if you can't make it back to base for whatever reason, this is your hideaway: an old, modular pre-fab research station. Tough to see visually, but not undetectable to sensors or a fairly determined probe droid. Some mining conglomerate or another abandoned it years ago after they finished testing for raw ore. You should have it all to yourselves. Here are the access and activation codes. Oh, and here are the passwords if anyone is around.

"I'm afraid the place is short on amenities, but it does have food, some medical gear, and a few repair supplies. There's no hangar, so if your ship is damaged, you'll be limited to whatever you can fix inside or in EVA suits. That reminds me, there's no docking ring so you'll have to use your suits just to get in. Also, there's no defenses, though there are a few personal weapons lying about. Really, all we've done is restart and stock the place with the bare essentials."

—Excerpt from briefing holo to Team Dorn (SpecForce 5th Regiment, Company 4/172).

Recon field base

"All right people, designate this spot 'Outpost Cinder' on your automaps. Razke, set up the command center under that ledge there. Aclé, those two points along the right bank should be good for covering positions. Reku, get up on that ridge and find a couple of surveillance posts. The topo grid shows a couple of likely spots. And keep your head down. We don't want to let them know we're here just yet. Jal, get over to that clearing and figure out a retrieval plan. Take Henle and the new kid with you. Move!"

—*Rebel SpecForce Pathfinder Major
(Team Razor).*

R

Report to Imperial Command

BREAKZZZ8755

Code _____ Omit

ImpScoutSecSurv

Moddell Sector

Mission 759/B

IX3244-B

IX3244-B reporting. Mission successful. Suitable previously unexplored system discovered. This forested moon fits Lord Vader's requirements perfectly. Only conceivable threat is presented by furred, dwarf bipeds. Their technology is laughably primitive. The spears, bows, and slings of these pathetic savages pose no threat to disciplined Imperial stormtroopers. We can safely ignore these contemptible little fur-balls.

ENDREPbreakbreak

ILLUSTRATED STAR WARS UNIVERSE: ENDOR



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sergeant Pfilbee Jhorn served as records officer for the Emperor's second expeditionary force to the Forest Moon of Endor. Displeased with the superficial reports of the first scouting team, the Emperor requested a detailed summary. Sergeant Jhorn filed several memos before his departure, insisting that he was not qualified for the job, but these memos were misfiled and never delivered to Sergeant Jhorn's superiors. Such circumstances account for the rather bitter and resentful tone of this report.

Imperial military records show that shortly after Sergeant Pfilbee Jhorn filed this report, he was transferred to a lengthy tour of duty alone riding the solar focusing mirrors in orbit around Coruscant. Following this assignment, he was sent to Tatooine, where he served as a custodian in the Imperial desert garrison.

Though my superiors have not seen fit to give me full details as to the Emperor's purpose in seeking further information on the Forest Moon of Endor, I am filing this report as requested. I will state up front that, since I was never given specifics as to the information of interest, this report will perforce be broad and general. As I have had no training in planetary survey techniques, I have avoided details of a technical nature.

The trip out here was horrendous. Endor itself is a silvery gas-giant that is difficult to reach even by convoluted hyperspace paths. As shown in the attachments, the huge planet is encircled by banded high clouds and orbited by nine moons of varying sizes. The largest moon, called the Forest Moon of Endor, is the size of a small, rocky planet. As the Forest Moon is the focus of this report, I have designated it Endor for simplicity.

The Endor system is extremely remote, not just from the Core systems but also from other Imperial bases, common trade routes, and other inhabited worlds. The captain of our transport claimed that simply reaching Endor involves half a dozen tricky hyperspace maneuvers (something to do with the enormous gravity of the gas-giant and the uncharted space in the sector). The captain rather snappishly told me to leave him alone, even after I informed him that I was on a fact-finding mission for the Emperor. (His name and service number are on file, should anyone wish to initiate formal disciplinary action.) These navigational uncertainties may rule out the establishment of an important base in this system.

Given such circumstances, it is no surprise that numerous ships have crash-landed on the Forest Moon, making it something of a "desert island" in space. The lush and wild environment provides resourceful victims the opportunity to eke out an existence, but I would envy no one the job of living under these primitive conditions. Give me Coruscant any day.

However, I do not know the Emperor's purposes

here. Given that Endor is isolated, yet able to support human life without expensive and difficult environment systems, this large moon may be an ideal place. My job is only to provide information, add recommendations if I feel they are relevant, and correct the numerous sketchy errors made by the initial survey team. If only they had done their job well enough in the first place, I would not have been given this redundant assignment.

(For example, the report of the first survey team stated that the only significant life-forms inhabiting the moon were the fuzzy and annoying Ewoks, who were presumed to be harmless. Not only did the survey team entirely miss the deadly giant Gorax, but also bloodthirsty condor dragons, packs of tall and timid yuzzums, and an entire settlement of off-planet marauders. The members of this first team are a disgrace to Imperial military service. Practically their only useful bit of information is that the furry Ewoks pose no serious threat and should be exterminated strictly because of their nuisance value.)

Of course, the first team's lack of thoroughness may be understandable if they were as poorly equipped as my team proved to be. When the transport ship dropped us off and shuttled our supplies down, we were appalled to find that only a group of two-rider AT-ST scout transports had been assigned to the entire task of covering a world. The food packs contained only the worst sorts of rations, leftovers from the Clone Wars, no doubt! The garment bins contained ice-assault suits decommissioned after the raid on Hoth! I had heard grumblings about incompetence, nepotism, and corruption in the Imperial Navy, and now I had no doubt.

Sworn to duty, though, my team and I set to work. We consisted of four scientifically trained troopers plus five stormtrooper escorts. We climbed aboard several jerky scout transports and clomped off through the undergrowth. I believe the AT-STs were in need of serious maintenance. The other members of my team performed the required duties, while I sat back and observed (as was my job). I took copious notes.

Much of the surface is densely covered with leg-

endary tall trees, giving it the name of Forest Moon; but other parts of Endor are rocky savannas and snow-topped mountains. Badlands to the south are dotted with sulfur springs and perilous pools. Bleak, rocky highlands are inhabited by the giant Gorax. The low gravity of the Endor moon encourages living things to become large, not just the mammoth conifer trees, but also many indigenous species.

The dense, primeval forest is the most striking feature of Endor, and most likely to cause serious difficulties for Imperial construction projects. Overhead, through the tapering treetops, the bright planet Endor fills much of the sky like a mirror, breaking through the blue of daylight or shining down like a spotlight in the night. (One side benefit of this would be the reduced cost of illumination for a security perimeter on any proposed base.)

Flowers grow high above the ground, sprouting from wind-borne seeds that have lodged in damp crevices in the enormous tree limbs. Their colors are so bright and so varied as to give one a headache, and even with my facemask filters toggled to their densest settings, the disgusting pollens still managed to penetrate, making me miserable with extraterrestrial allergies.

The thickly overgrown forest floor, with its groves of free-palms and ferns, proved extremely hazardous even for the flexible capabilities of our scout transport. If Imperial engineers think they can simply land on the moon, ignore the indigenous life-forms, and set up their base of operations without difficulty, they're in for a large, unpleasant surprise.

While our AT-STs could maneuver through some of the thickest foliage, I'd consider it impossible for a larger AT-AT to make its way beyond the largest clearings. This does not preclude, however, the use of such armored walkers for intimidation around, say, a big landing platform in the depths of the forest.

Still, even our smaller scout walker suffered several mishaps on our plodding journey through the forest: I can't begin to list all the times we stumbled in treacherous and hidden gullies concealed by the underbrush. We wasted many hours disassembling twisted metal knee joints and repairing them, occasionally even battering bent components with rocks just to make them fit back into their appropriate sockets. Naturally, our AT-ST repair kits contained none of the spare parts we needed.

The animal life on Endor is none too friendly. (I couldn't begin to say whether any of the game is edible; our old military rations were tasteless, but even that seemed preferable to eating some stringy, musty rodent grubbing in the underbrush.)

While our scout walker was being repaired—again—several of us explored the perimeter and encountered a dangerous decoy creature, which we named a tempter. The tempter lives inside a dark, hollow stump, waiting for other predators to pass by. The tempter apparently exudes a provocative smell that makes predators salivate. From the shadows of its tree den, it opens its yawning black mouth, using its articulated tongue as a lure.

The tempter's tongue is an astonishing piece of camouflage, with a small and furry appendage that looks just like a particularly stupid rodent. The tongue appendage has its own muscles and even a dense nerve cluster that may act as a primitive secondary brain. The decoy appendage moves, making strange and tempting sounds, then ducks back into the blackness of the hollow tree.

When one of our scouts reached into the hollow trunk to secure the rodent specimen, the tempter nearly bit his entire hand off. As we struggled to free him, the gray, serpentine form lunged out of its hiding place in the trunk, hoping to finish off the wounded prey. We blasted it, then dissected the remains of the carcass.

The tempter looks like a long, blunt eel, with pale, fleshy skin covered with a thick mucus that allows it to slither into tight spots and also to strike outward, freeing itself in a flash. Apparently once it has had its meal, the tempter cleans blood and debris from the area, then lies in wait again. Once the lair in the hollow trunk is filled with bones and refuse, the tempter must move out—probably at night, under the silvery light of the gas-giant, slithering among the free-palms to find a new place to set up a trap.

We tended our wounded comrade and bandaged his arm, but his injury greatly diminished his use to us for the rest of the survey operation.

The most common creatures on Endor are the obnoxious Ewoks, feral and deceptively cute hairy things that seem to consider themselves our equals. Ewoks practically infest the forests with their tree villages. It would give me no greater pleasure than to burn down these clumsy and primitive structures,

but the task is far too great for our small party. I would suggest, though, that if the Emperor intends to make any substantial use of this Forest Moon, he see to it that the Ewoks are exterminated before they can cause significant damage with their ignorant meddling.

One member of our team unwisely became enamored of the Ewok society and culture. He squandered valuable time studying them and wrote copious descriptions of his impressions, though he did not bother to do a single dissection to add to our *real* knowledge of these...these creatures. I have reprimanded him severely for his misplaced priorities, but I include his observations here for completeness, though I have rewritten some of the insipid and overblown prose.

The Ewok civilization is extremely primitive and simple, with little of unique interest to warrant study by already overworked Imperial exoanthropologists. Somehow, by sheer accident, the Ewoks have performed many spectacular engineering feats, including catapults, waterwheels, and skin gliders that allow them to soar on the winds and remain aloft for a long time in the small moon's low gravity. Even the gruff engineer on our team admitted his grudging admiration for their discoveries.

It is humorous to watch the Ewoks attempt to create weapons from the crudest raw materials: stone knives, spears, bows and arrows, nets, clumsy animal traps, even catapults. Nothing the Ewoks invent would have a chance of even scratching our Imperial weaponry, though the contest (and resulting Ewok slaughter!) might be amusing to watch.

Even when viewed from the level of the forest floor, the Ewok tree villages do seem marginally impressive. It appears obvious that the tree cities grow and evolve over the generations, as the scurrying little creatures build annexes to the core group of dwellings in a cluster of the towering conifers called lifetrees.

These hardy conifer trees are long-lived and durable, able to survive the onslaughts of disease, lightning strikes, and forest fires. They continue to grow for centuries, towering up to a thousand meters tall.

The thick protective bark of the lifetree exudes a natural pesticide that drives away all but the most persistent insects. Knowing no better methods of chemistry, the aboriginal Ewoks distill an insect

repellant from the lifetree bark for their own uses. They also use the trees as sources of wood and bark fiber for weapons, garments, utensils, and furniture; as storage places for pure drinking water; and as a good place to find medicinal plants and herbs.

The Ewoks have developed a deep and superstitious connection with the lifetrees. To cement this bond, each village plants a new seedling for each baby Ewok born; then they carefully nurture the seedling as if it were a sibling to the baby. Throughout that Ewok's

life, he or she is linked to this "totem tree." When the Ewoks die, they believe their spirits go to live inside their personal totem trees. Of course it is impossible to believe such a preposterous idea, but the Ewoks as a species do not appear to possess more than a rudimentary intelligence.

In times of crisis, Ewok shamans attempt to communicate with the ancient spirits residing within the oldest trees to ask for advice. Being the village con artists, the shamans naturally insist that this is an intensely private ritual. No one else has ever heard such ancestral voices, but the gullible Ewoks do not question the sacred advice brought back by their shamans. After all, why would the spirits inhabiting their totem trees ever lie?

As for the design of the tree villages themselves, the structures at first seem to have been arranged at random, wherever the short attention of the furry creatures halted for the moment. But when our team member took the time to observe the villages thoroughly—too thoroughly, in my opinion—he noted a basic blueprint that all Ewoks seem to follow.

The central "village" of thatched-roof huts is built into the primary limbs, situated high enough above the ground that they are out of reach of most predators. Suspended

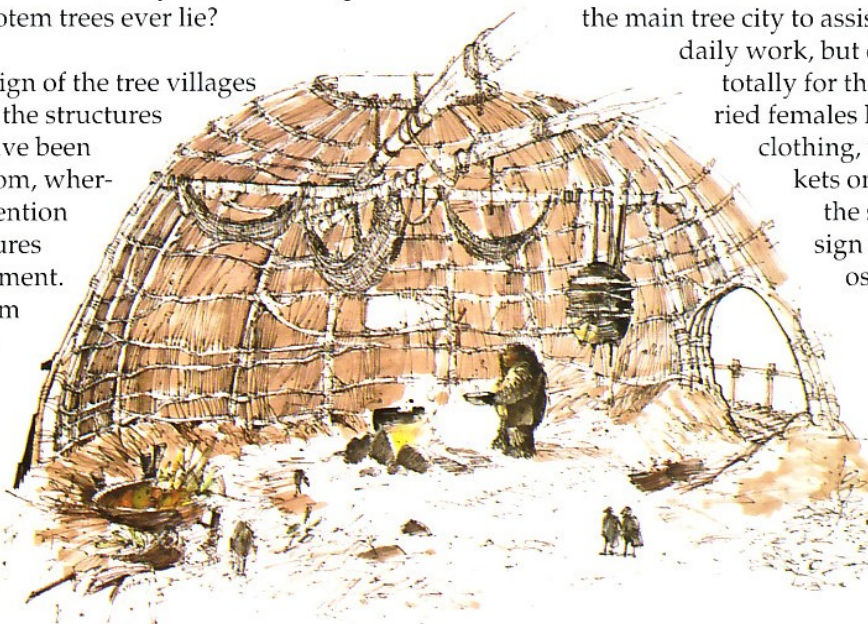
bridges between trees link adjoining and distant huts; knotted rope ladders allow access up or down.

The thatched-roof huts offer plenty of warmth, shelter, and protection in the mild climate of the Forest Moon. But the whole thing could be made to go up in flames with minimal effort, simply by tossing in a few incendiary devices. In a typical tree city, the Ewok elders—funny-looking, gray-haired little beasts—order the largest huts built directly on the trunk of the

tree. These central dwellings belong to the chief of the tribe, who uses the largest open areas for village gatherings, meetings, council fires, and storytelling ceremonies.

Family groups live in their own dwelling clusters on outlying trees, though separate communal huts are built for groups of unmarried females, respected elders, and visitors. A sealed cluster of structures, higher than the main tree city, is used for the communities food storage.

Unmarried Ewok males often spend a contemplative period living alone in the forest, building their own small dwellings near enough to the main tree city to assist with the Ewoks' daily work, but otherwise fending totally for themselves. Unmarried females leave gifts of food, clothing, weaponry, or trinkets on the door-steps of the solitary males as a sign of their attraction, ostensibly to tell the males how much the city misses them and wishes them to come back as part of a new family unit, preferably as that female's mate.



Ewok children (top) and Ewok dwellings (above) show how these primitive creatures attempt to make do with the squalor of their existence.

Such bizarre and rigid marriage customs seem like an artifact of some of the oddest practices in the early days of the Old Republic.

If the male Ewok wishes to end his solitary time, he must build an acceptable family dwelling in the larger tree city as a place for him and his mate to live. When an Ewok bachelor begins building his new dwelling, signaling that he has decided to take a mate, the unmarried females step up their work at wooing him (at least the ones who are interested). The Ewok male does not announce his choice of mate until he has completed his home; the chosen female has the right to refuse him, or the dwelling he has built. I could barely refrain from rolling my eyes at hearing such barbarities.

As with nearly all primitive races, the Ewoks developed a religious system based on superstition, worshipping the bounty around them and the forest from which they draw the necessities of their lives. Religious ceremonies are designed to please various gods of weather, deities representing the trees, the hunt, engineering prowess, fertility—as well as darker spirits who symbolized the threats and terrors of the forest.

At various times of the year, the Ewoks hold extravagant festivals of the rain and sun, springtime flowers, and fruits, as well as certain “Dark Rituals” involving bloody sacrifices. These rituals are held at night by the orange light of smoky bonfires, into which the shamans toss the green leaves of spiny hallucinogenic herbs that cause the Ewoks to have vivid dreams.

Every Ewok village appoints its own male or female mystic/shaman—the previously described con artist—who makes up answers about what the gods really want, how they can be pleased, how the Ewoks can make their prayers heard. For this “service,” the village grants the shaman anything he or she could want: crystals, shells, polished skulls, and other items they find interesting. Most mystics wear a large animal skull on their head.

Some shamans are said to be “as old as the trees,”

apparently symbolizing their connection with the lifetrees and their imagined ability to communicate with the ancient Ewok spirits that dwell inside them. The shamans caper around with fetishes, beating drums and dancing. They also seem to know a few simple illusions, tricks, parlor magic. Their advice to the tribe leader is usually common sense delivered with an aura of mysticism.

Village mystics also pretend to be powerful healers, applying vile-smelling herbal medicines supposedly passed from generation to generation. Admittedly, many types of fungus, lichens, roots, berries, flowers, epiphytes, and bark may have some minimal medicinal effect,

but I suspect the greatest effectiveness of these “cures” comes from the imagination and faith of the hapless Ewok patients.

Ewok villages adhere to a rigid clan system, like the Imperial military.

Only, instead of molded white body armor, they use different raggedy garments for head coverings or hoods, apparently to signify an Ewok’s place in the hunting order or the family unit.

Ewok warriors wear wooden chest shields, the jawbones of small animals, and sharp teeth. Others ornament themselves with feathers, necklaces made of crystals, pendants



An example of an Ewok “shaman”—the ones who talk to trees and get mysterious messages from the forest, and who call upon primitive superstitions and “magic” to defy Imperial authority.

of polished rock or shells, making their bodies look like a clutter of trinkets and junk. Prominent members of the Ewok village carry totems as symbols of rank. The lead warrior wears a headdress made of pale feathers, "the white wings of hope." The eldest son of the tribal leader's family wears the "red wings of courage," while the second son wears the "blue wings of strength."

Ewoks share strong family ties, appearing especially attached to their fuzzy, grublike children. The whole village fawns over newborn babies, smothering them with affection and attention, considering the care of the young a shared responsibility, even though the things look like bristly rodents to be squashed underfoot.

The Forest Moon provides plenty of food for scavengers to eat and sweet mattberries to squeeze for their juice (which is mixed with water and fermented into a bitter but intoxicating brew).

Even with their diminutive size, the Ewoks laughably consider themselves great hunters. Solitary hunters snare small animals, but occasionally an entire hunting party of Ewok warriors will set a deadly trap for larger meat animals—such as the boar-wolves.

Shaggy boar-wolves have tusk teeth, a keen sense of smell, and saberlike claws that can tear holes in trees. Though they have a penchant for howling at the silvery gas-planet in the night sky, these truly impressive predators possess an incredible patience to hide and wait out of sight once they have cornered their prey. They have fed on many Ewoks this way.

Though the boar-wolves are three times as tall as the Ewoks, the scurrying little creatures have somehow stumbled upon effective methods for fighting the monsters with spears and poison darts: The Ewoks first bait a clever trap with scraps of bloody meat from other kills and carefully hide a vine net on the forest floor. When a boar-wolf attempts to rip into the fresh meat, the net tangles around its huge armored body, enough to slow and confuse it while the Ewok hunting party charges out of the underbrush. One such kill provides enough meat to feed an Ewok tree village for days, if one could stomach the pungent and stringy meat.

In our travels across Endor, we also encountered a shallow, placid lake on which live another tribe of Ewoks. The squeaky vermin have built their huts on stilts out in the glassy-smooth water, where the water and surrounding marshes protect them from large predators. These Ewoks get most of their food by setting wicker traps for succulent crustaceans in the lake.

Older Ewoks spend their time harvesting the

tough marsh grasses and flattening them to dry in the sun; they plait the dry, fibrous grasses into ragged mats, clothing, baskets, and decorative tapestries. The young lake Ewoks love to splash in the water and dig in the mud for buried shellfish, which keeps them filthy with caked dirt.

A tribe of cliff-dwelling Ewoks has made its home on a sheer rock face beside a spraying waterfall. Suicidally ignorant Ewok engineers somehow installed a primitive but intricate set of waterwheels, driven by the force of falling water. These turning waterwheels drive large wooden gears that rotate grindstones, operate conveyor belts from one part of the cliff village to another, and run a set of lift platforms up and down the cliff.

We happened to witness a revered annual event, at which representatives from the scattered Ewok tribes gather for a series of games. These "tribal games" allow them to show off their primitive antics. The Ewok revelers engage in dancing and storytelling, though some of the other activities are far more dangerous.

The most popular game among young Ewoks is to show off their prowess in tree-jumping. Ewok contestants climb to the top of the tallest lifetree, then leap off the highest limb. They must somehow catch themselves on lower limbs, jump off other

Though they show no scientific skills of their own, many Ewoks are inquisitive about technology, occasionally to their detriment.



branches, and continue to descend all the way to the ground at a breathtaking breakneck speed. Tragic accidents occur when an Ewok athlete misses a branch and plummets to the hard forest floor amid much shrieking and chattering from the other spectators. It is enough to give one a headache.

Though Ewoks enjoy tribal ceremonies, singing and playing music on primitive drums, they spend endless hours exchanging incessant stories in their bubbly, jabbering language. They have kept alive a strong oral tradition, spending many an evening's entertainment telling and retelling the exploits of legendary (and probably imaginary) Ewok warriors, great hunts against huge predators, and lone quests to other parts of the Forest Moon. Even now they are probably still telling of the marvels of truly impressive Imperial technology, which we showed them for the first time.

On our travels we found that the initial Imperial survey had missed yet another race of intelligent creatures (not that it was any surprise). These troublemakers are similar in size to the Ewoks but able to move much faster. If it is possible for a life-form to be even more unlikable than an Ewok, these creatures succeed in that area.

Teeks are rodentlike, simian creatures that live in the forest, scavenging and stealing things from animal nests and from Ewok dwellings. The Ewoks don't like Teeks at all, considering it a sure sign of trouble even to be seen with one of the creatures.

Though Teeks are accomplished thieves and collectors of all kinds of things, they do not consider themselves dishonest, since they leave a trinket or token of equivalent value. What the Teek considers "equal value" is often very different from what the original owner of the stolen object might expect. We learned this upon finding some of our scanners and sophisticated tools replaced with dried seedpods and polished beetle shells.

Teeks have long, pointy ears and scruffy white fur, beady black eyes, and a propensity for constant



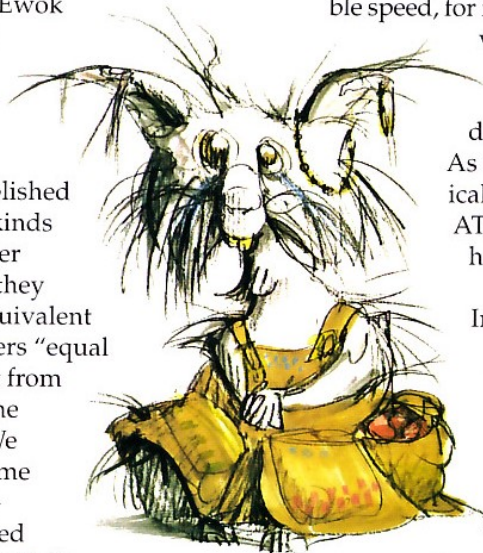
Some Ewoks have inadvertently stumbled upon the secret of flight through the use of crude gliders (above). Teeks (below) are fast-moving troublemakers.

chattering. A set of buckteeth makes them look stupid and goatish, but their hands are agile and fast, amazingly so. Teeks wear rudimentary clothing, with many belts, pouches, and pockets for those items they manage to snatch.

Teeks have evolved an enormously fast metabolism, which allows them to put on bursts of incredible speed, for fleeing both from enemies and from the victims of their thievery. We attempted to shoot a specimen for our collection, but each time the chattering, dashing Teeks escaped.

As my team and I continued our mechanical march across the landscape, all of our AT-ST transports broke down at the foothills of the rocky highlands. All of them at once! Muttering about low-bid Imperial contracts, we left the defective vehicles sitting at the base of a steep ridge and set off on foot. The retrieval teams would come and get us in a few days anyway, and we were sick to death of the towering forests.

Give me a stark landscape any day. To the north the dense, claustrophobic forests ended in an abrupt line of the sheer Yawari Cliffs, where the land has dropped away in a titanic slump. I could imagine ignorant Ewoks jour-



neying to the edge of the cliffs from above, seeing the world below swathed in morning mist—they must have believed they had found the edge of the world.

Inaccessible, wind-tunneled caves dot the open face of soft sandstone, and we made our way to the shelter they offered. Apparently the Ewoks had invented a crude skin-glider to fly in the thermals

rising against the bright rock face and to land on broad ledges.

At the time, though, we did not know that inside some of the larger caves live the carnivorous condor dragons, flying reptilian creatures with bony ridges along their spines and grasping front claws for capturing prey in flight. The condor dragons walk on two legs inside their eyrie caves, hunched over with wings curled in front of them. We know—we saw one firsthand, and it took the combined firepower of our stormtrooper escorts just to stun one so that we could examine it.

A condor dragon has a single fused fang for tearing through the thick hides of its prey, and two long lower tusks for brutal stabs and a quick kill. Large yellow eyes with round black pupils have extremely sharp vision, able to spot moving prey even through dense treetop foliage.

Agile flyers on their leathery wings, the condor dragons cry out with piercing shrieks, hoping to startle small animals from cover. Impressive beasts. The condor dragon snatches its victim, then flies back toward its eyrie cave. If the prey struggles too much during the flight, the dragon simply drops it, then swoops down to snatch the smashed body from the sharp tangle of branches below. The condor dragon will eat its fresh meat dead or alive; it isn't picky.

Back in its cave and stuffed with a heavy meal, the condor dragon falls into a stuporous sleep,

curled in a dark corner, where it looks like a leathery boulder. Luckily the one we encountered had not yet recovered from its groggy slumber, and so we survived. If our timing had been different, we would have joined the bones strewn the cave floor....

Once we had succeeded in scaling the Yawari Cliffs, we found the terrain becoming worse yet, dryer and harsher, with few living plants and only poisonous insects. Rather like the stormtrooper academy on Carida.

The terrible Desert of Salma is a land of acid pools and dry lakes, where the ground is caked, dried mud. Frequent dust storms, powered by brutal high winds, scour away all trails and would have blinded us except for the sensors embedded in our visors. Many bones and mummified corpses lay buried among the baked rocks and the lifeless chemical soil. I hope some of them are Ewoks.

Beyond the blistering desert rise limestone bluffs, like bone-white mounds of ancient candlewax. Very picturesque. However, in this harsh landscape dwells the most fearsome of all creatures indigenous to the Forest Moon of Endor—the giant Gorax.

Incredibly massive, the Gorax is a true behemoth more than thirty meters high, pushing the limits of growth even in the low gravity of the Forest Moon. The Goraxes live in their high crags, making their homes inside immense grottoes.

The Goraxes look vaguely humanlike, with tapered primate faces and narrow chins. They make grunting, roaring noises that seem to convey raw emotion—anger, amusement, hunger—but no discernible words. The Goraxes wear fur clothes held together by large, rough stitches. For weapons they fashion stone axes from slabs of rock lashed onto handles made from entire tree trunks. Imagine what fighters they could be, if the Emperor could

figure out how to train them.

The Goraxes hang enormous ornaments upon their bodies, rings the size of docking ports dangling on their earlobes, beads the size of boat anchors in their hair. Their large, pointed ears are the size of dragons' wings, swept back and curved to be highly sensitive to the noises of smaller creatures.

The giants thrive on heat and keep a bright fire blazing in their caves at all times. Since they live out in the deep desert, the Goraxes must make frequent expeditions to the forest to gather fallen trees. Because the Goraxes live in shadowy caves, their glittering-black eyes are unaccustomed to bright lights, and they are easily blinded. Therefore, the Goraxes hunt primarily at night.

I ceased being so enamored of these monsters, though, at about the time our entire party was captured by one of the behemoths.

Although they are primitive and powerful, Goraxes like to keep pets. For instance, a Gorax will find a boar-wolf mother who has gone to ground in a cave to give birth to a litter of young. The Gorax smashes open her whelping place, kills the new mother, and selects a young boar-wolf pup it wants for its pet. In keeping with its own fondness for bodily ornamentation, the Gorax will strap leather collars and harnesses on his pup, raising it as a hunting companion.

In search of other pets, the Goraxes kidnap Ewoks, smashing through the walls of their tree-city huts and grabbing a handful of wriggling furry captives. Unfortunately the giants have limited intelligence and an extremely short attention span. Some of their pets starve through lack of attention; others die when the Gorax grows bored and kills them.

Similarly, the Gorax took great delight in finding our bright white-armored forms scrambling among the rocks, and it managed to capture all of us. Hunting by night, as usual, one Gorax was attracted by the defensive lights around our camp perimeter. The Gorax smashed the bright lights and then chased us around the rocks, scooping up every single member of our party.

As the stormtrooper escorts rushed out, setting up tripods for their portable blaster cannons, the Gorax grabbed the struggling white captives and stuffed them into a sack at its hip. Before long, I found myself shoved in with them as well. There seemed to be no escape.

Satisfied with its night's work, the Gorax marched back to its cave, where it placed all of us in a huge hanging cage made of lashed logs. Apparently curious, the Gorax wanted to see what lay beneath the shiny white shells of the new creatures, and so the giant prodded the five stormtroopers to peel away the armor. The Gorax grew frustrated, then tore the armor away itself. None of its new pets survived the inspection.

Luckily the Gorax lost interest quickly and collapsed onto its heap of sleeping furs, snoring like a thunderstorm in the close confines of the cave. Seeing our chance, we used the laser cutters in the packs—finally, a piece of Imperial-issue equipment that actually worked!—to hack our way free of the crude cage and flee out of the winding caves to the lower catacombs.

One fearsome creature that has formed a symbiotic—or perhaps parasitic—relationship with the giant Gorax is the “rearing spider,” a massive but slow-moving beast. Six-legged, with large tusks instead of piercing fangs, rearing spiders reside in the bottoms of caves inhabited by the Gorax, living on scraps discarded by the giants and disposing of the remains of forgotten pets. The rearing spiders spin large, thick webs across expanses of the caves—but these webs are primarily nests, rather than traps to capture prey. While they will attack intruders when provoked, rearing spiders mainly hide in the shadows and allow the Gorax to do most of the hunting for them. We encountered one of these large creatures on our escape, but luckily it had no stomach for battle and fled into the shadows as we charged out of the Gorax's lair. In the dimness of the Endor-lit night, we raced across the desolation, fleeing the land of the Gorax.

West of the densely forested terrain lie oceans and oceans of grass, plains of dry brown in summer, blankets of velvety bright green after the spring rains. The delineation between arid savanna and thick forest is very abrupt. In clumps in the hollows of rolling hills are islands of trees, a slash of dark green on the wind-rippled plains, where small animals make their homes.

We trudged out into the vast grasslands, seeking safety and shelter until the return ship could retrieve us. My Ewok-loving comrade told me that the furry vermin call this savanna the Dragon's Pelt. I told him to shut up.

As far as the eye can see, the rolling brown grasses are studded with dark lava rocks that jut like blackened teeth out of the ground. A range of snowy mountains, the Dragon's Spine, lies across the horizon in the distance, but it was much too far away for us to reach.

One night on our plodding journey we were visited by what I can only call fairylights at our evening campfires. These tiny, luminous flying creatures come out at night with buzzing, squeaking noises. Swarms of them were attracted by fires and our

Yuzzums wade through the grass, hoping to catch ruggers, succulent rodents that they roast over open fires on the prairie.

presence. We tried to shoo them away, but nothing seemed to work, and the things continued to pester us long into the darkness. The fairylights did no obvious harm, other than forcing us to lose sleep with their flashing, spinning, dizzying light shows.

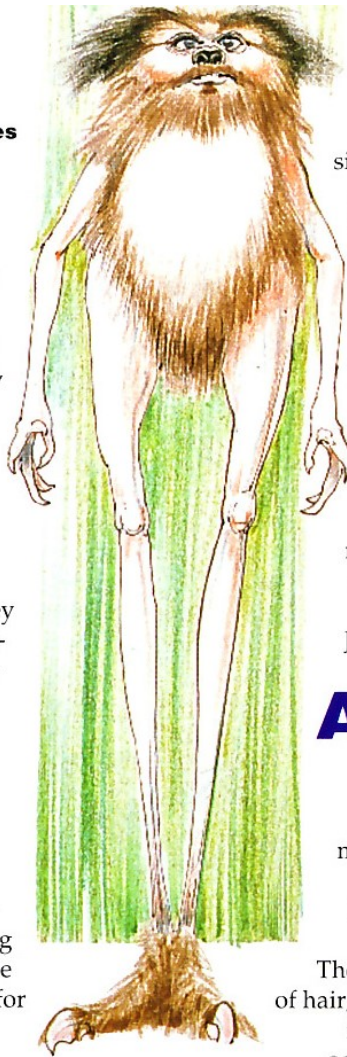
We could not tell for certain what the fairylights eat, or even whether they are true life-forms rather than just strange bright phenomena. The lights seemed to absorb firelight as a source of nourishment, but one of my surviving companions insisted that they thrived on happy emotions and expression of warm feelings, such as laughter or giggles.

If this is so, then they got very little nourishment from me.

On the following day we ran into a swarm of yuzzums, creatures even less intelligent than Ewoks, that dwell on the plains of Endor. Standing tall on stilt-like legs above the whipping dry grasses, yuzzums wade through the savanna, looking down and searching for rodent-like ruggers running through the grass to their communal warrens.

Yuzzums have a wide mouth with protruding teeth, and a shock of dark hair on top of their heads. Groups of yuzzums stride side by side through the tall grasses, searching for a fresh rugger meal. At times, when a yuzzum manages to snatch a rodent sunning itself on a rock, he will eat the rugger raw, snapping the entire thing down his gullet, fur and bones and all.

At other times, a yuzzum hunting party will burn narcotic weeds into the holes of the rodent warrens. The small furred creatures stagger out, seemingly dizzy and delirious—easy pickings for the yuzzums to thrust into large sacks. Then the yuzzums have a rugger-roast over a crackling bonfire near one of the clusters of dark trees in the hollows. The yuzzums skewer the small creatures on sticks and, after roasting them, ritually stride about on their stilt-legs, feeding each other the sizzling meat, offering pieces to their companions and eating only what others offer to them. We found the whole ritual sickening and disgusting.



Yuzzums are partially intelligent, but seem unable to understand any life-form but their own. Which was fine, since we ignored them right back. I had, of course, heard of yuzzums before, as they were kidnapped at one time to be sold throughout the Empire by black marketeers as slaves or pets.

I recalled vividly that one smuggler had tried to pay off a long-outstanding debt to Jabba the Hutt with a cargo of yuzzums. Instead Jabba fed the smuggler to his rancor in the pit, along with several of the yuzzum prisoners. The rancor didn't much care for the yuzzum meat, though. As I understand it, some of the kidnapped yuzzums can still be found hanging, mostly forgotten, in Jabba's dungeons.

At last we encountered civilization. Of a sort. But our choices were limited on Endor. Some of the most fearsome creatures on Endor live out on the Dragon's Pelt savanna. The reptilian marauders work together in a powerful military fashion to bring terror to the Ewoks and cause damage out of sheer spite. How could we not like them? The marauders have greasy, thick strands of hair, usually pale, sometimes dark, sprouting from the crowns of their flat heads, occasionally from the skin on their faces.

Heavy protective brow ridges thrust like hoods over glittering eyes; pug nose-holes give the marauders a skull-like appearance.

They captured us, dragging us into their castle, but we could tell we were among like-minded creatures. The long-lived marauders originated off-planet and crashed nearly a century ago on the Forest Moon. As they tortured and interrogated us, we picked up a few details of their situation as well.

The marauders had once imagined themselves to be great pirates of the spaceways—but because none of them understood how to pilot their stolen ships, their reign of terror and plunder proved much shorter than they had expected. They came in a stolen ship they were barely able to pilot under the best of circumstances, and the navigator could not handle the complex gravity patterns in the Endor system (see my earlier comment).

Though the navigator survived the crash, he was executed immediately for his unconscionable failure. None of the other marauders had the slightest

idea how to repair their ship and get off the moon, and with the navigator dead they had no idea where to go on to from here.

Resigned to their fate, the marauders built a large ancient-style castle, which comforted them with its imposing stone walls. They cannibalized parts of their wrecked spaceship as furniture. For his throne, the marauder King Terak tore the captain's chair from the bridge of the dilapidated ship and placed it in his royal audience chamber.

Carved, horned lava-rock obelisks guard the front approach to the castle, warning off enemies and boasting of the murderous prowess of the marauders. The castle itself looks clumsy and squarish, with no finesse—but it is very sturdy, made of quarried stone blocks hauled by blurrugs, their beasts of burden.

Stones around the castle entranceway shout out with crude carved hieroglyphs, but many of the

words are impossible to interpret, since few of the marauders can read or write Basic.

The castle is surrounded by a deep moat filled with black water. While constructing the castle, one of the marauders suggested installing the still functioning automatic defense mechanisms from their crashed ship for further protection against assault. A selective disintegrator field, shaped like a torpedo, targets any object that touches the water. (The marauders themselves fear this defense greatly, because they have forgotten how to turn it off!)

Terak, the king of the marauders, holds his mercenary pirates together while he searches for a new power source to be installed in their long-disassembled attack ship. He expects the solution to their exile to be a simple one, a gadget he can add to the abandoned ship so that it can take off again even after decades of disrepair.

Terak himself doesn't remember why he is searching for a power pack, but he is obsessed with getting the power—even though he would not know what to do with it if he held it in his scaly hands. However, he could be a useful ally, if the Emperor wishes to join forces (in name only) with a warlord already on Endor.

His companion, Charal, is a female shape-shifter, a Force-wielding witch who apparently escaped from her exile on a planet called Dathomir. Working by her form-changing deception, Charal fell in with the band of reptilian marauders when they were already in their last days, while they were being hunted down by combined space law forces...as was Charal herself. She intended to stay with Terak and his raiders only long enough to get herself another passage to freedom—but the shipwreck on



Endor ruined everything.

The lower-ranking marauders are staunchly loyal and subservient to their leader, but otherwise they are obsessed with rank and title among themselves. Over their decades-long exile, the marauders have made up new ranks and titles for themselves so that everyone has an impressive-sounding place—but no one exactly understands the hierarchy anymore. Nevertheless, these communal creatures prefer to be in large groups, feasting in banquet halls, playing card games with each other, even marching out to raid the Ewoks. They do not feel comfortable being alone.

Because they are stranded on Endor, and because they know no way other than preying on weaker people, the marauders regularly raid Ewok tree villages just inside the forest boundary, burning their dwellings and taking the Ewoks prisoner for use as slaves to perform manual labor. See, another reason for accepting them as allies!

When marching out for battle, the marauders wear helmets and armor cobbled together from scraps of their old protective suits, junk, metal, and thin shielding plate peeled off the abandoned ship. Inside their helmets and boots and across their chests they wear yuzzum-fur ornamentation, as well as capes and suits made from blurrig hide and condor dragon pelts. Before marching out on a great attack, the marauders blow battle horns and carry banners to symbolize their individual ranks. Despite the imposing appearance of their blockish castle and their leftover blasters and other high-tech weapons, the marauders have a very rudimentary understanding of technology, which often causes more harm than good when they try to use it.

The one technological thing the marauders understand is their weapons—most of which are simple old-style blasters and blaster cannons. They have managed to keep most of their weapons working decade after decade, though now many are

cloth-wrapped, rusted, and barely functional.

As a last resort, the marauders are also proficient with long swords for hand-to-hand combat.

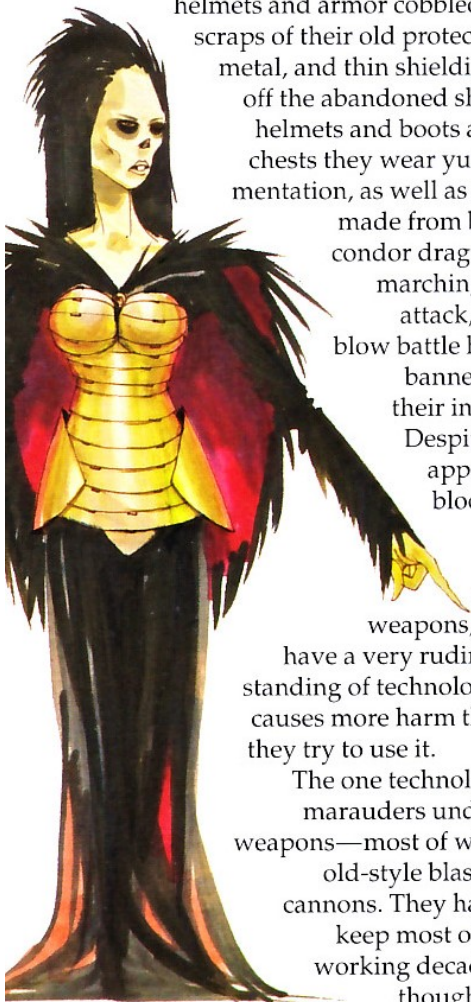
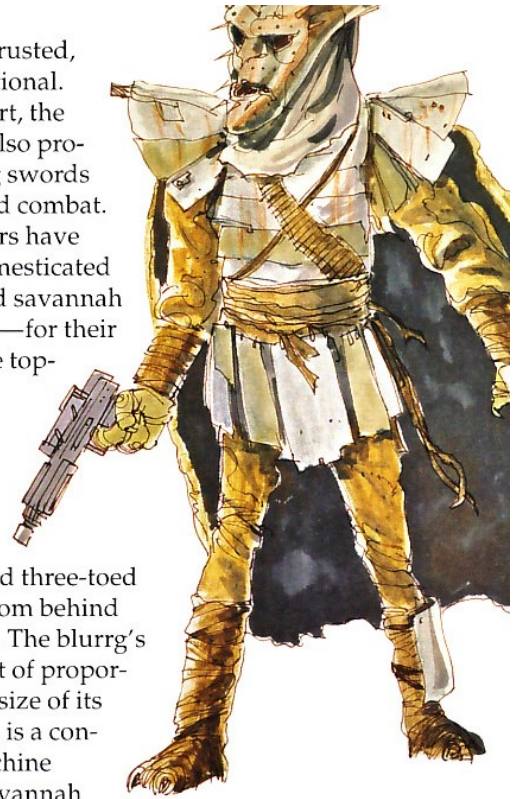
The marauders have successfully domesticated large two-legged savannah beasts—blurrigs—for their heavy labor. The top-heavy monsters look primarily like a bloated reptilian head standing on two meaty legs with splayed three-toed feet, balanced from behind by a lashing tail. The blurrig's mouth, huge out of proportion even to the size of its enormous head, is a constant eating machine for shoveling savannah grass, weeds, saplings, and anything else edible that gets in its way.

The blurrigs are stupid and slow, but very strong. Marauders control them with spiked chain bridles, riding on their smooth backs with stiff saddles, though occasionally the beasts fight back in a slow, reflexive way.

At first the marauders attempted to use blurrigs as attack creatures, but the creatures simply did not react fast enough, nor could they be provoked into anything more than a slightly riled stupor.

Blurrigs are so stupid they walk right into small trees, knocking them down with their massive-stone-skulled heads. A blurrig might overestimate its own strength, or underestimate the strength of the tree, and batter itself senseless trying to crash through a thicket, rather than just going around. Blurrigs can get hopelessly tangled in the underbrush, unable to remember how to get back out again.

The marauders took us down into their dungeons, and they took all of our weapons and posses-



The marauders of Endor are a brutal lot, stranded on the Forest Moon because they do not have the skills to fix the technology they have stolen. Their leader Terak (top) and his shape-shifting Nightsister partner Charal (left) keep the rowdy marauders in line through sheer intimidation.

sions, but in the end they tortured only one of us to death. The Force witch Charal, who called herself a Nightsister, freed us after making us promise to take her with us when the retrieval ship homed in on our beacons—but Terak grew angry with her and tossed her into a cage even as we escaped into the savanna, watching the lights of the retrieval ship plunge through the evening skies.

We ran to the open doors of the retrieval ship, only three survivors out of the original nine, as the marauders pursued us, but a few blaster shots from the ship frightened them off.

We left Endor with nothing more than our memories and my report. The final decision is up to the Emperor, of course, but I hope he chooses never to return to this unpleasant Forest Moon.

Firepower

More red lights flashed on the X-wing's flight-board and laser-scored gray metal filled the viewport. Squadron leader Makintay's R2 droid squealed and chattered alarms, telling him they'd just lost their port-side firepower. The laser tip assembly snapped off as the S-foil barely cleared the Imperial carrier's underbelly.

"We can do it. Hang in there," Mak urged, willing his small fighter free. Red-gold light filled the cockpit, the X-wing very nearly consumed by the carrier's burning exhaust. Mak squeezed his eyes shut, then in the next breath, the glare was gone. The starfield welcomed him as he swooped up and out, accelerating toward the jump point.

"Green Leader," his wingman called, "Are you okay?"

"Dammit, Dallin," Mak snapped, "Obey orders. Go!" Both Green and Blue squadrons should no longer be visible. They'd been given a pre-set hyperspace vector to jump out of the

battle zone. Mak noted their Corellian corvette companion had jumped to safety. They'd hoped to see her board the Imperial carrier. Mak cursed; no chance of that now. Somehow the carrier had by-passed the Rebels' jamming signals to recall its TIE fighter escort.

Responding to their commander's orders, Dallin and the six fighters following him in a tight V formation winked out into hyperspace.

Makintay gave one quick glance behind, a farewell to the young pilot he had tried to save. Spinning ever deeper into space, Gifford's X-wing had been reduced to fragmented debris. "Damn you, Dru," Mak cursed, his voice rough with restrained emotion, "I told you to leave it." He had no time for further eulogy. The TIEs rounded the carrier, bearing down on him, seeking another kill.

Mak punched the hyperspace jump and the starlight blurred further with his filmed vision. Gifford too had known how badly their Rebel friends back at Eyrie Base needed those supplies. The ground crews were listless and tired as much because of meager rations as a crippling work schedule. The Hoth disaster hadn't helped matters. Eyrie had come to the aid of the survivors, giving what little they could spare to aid the Alliance's Central Command in establishing a new base.

It was a vicious circle that grew more so with each passing day --they desperately needed to capture an Imperial supply ship, or raid one of their bases, but ever more X-wings were grounded for want of replacement parts. Curse the luck. They'd had that stray carrier almost completely disabled, the ventral engine the only one still burning when those TIEs had returned.

So near yet so far, and worse, Gifford was dead, another X-wing lost to them. Mak had tried so hard to save the boy, risking his own life. He'd diverted two of Gifford's pursuers, thrusting his fighter into the fray as the foolhardy, brave Rebel dared one last blast at the carrier's engine. Mak had imagined his X-wing as a defending sword in his fist, flashing down to intercept the enemies' blades.

In the high-tech worlds beyond Makintay's native planet, Hargeeva, the sword was considered an archaic weapon. Mak snorted. No, even at home in Arginall City the sword would be considered hopelessly out-of-date these days. But 20 years ago, on his eighth birthday, Mak had been sent for the customary training with his father's Palace Guard. Little more than an infant, he'd still been bowed and scraped to, called "M'Lord" by grizzled, battle-hardened soldiers. Lord Stevan Makintay, elder son and heir. It seemed impossible those days could have belonged to the one lifetime.

Disinherited by an enraged father, all that stayed with Mak was his useless expertise with a sword. Still there was much in fencing moves that could be adapted to battle strategies even when an Xwing was your weapon. Mak's pilots liked to joke about his frequent sword-references. They assumed he'd earned his famous scar in one of his native-world's

aristocratic duels. Mak smiled and touched a gloved hand to that thin white line running from the corner of his right eye to the earlobe. No way would he ever reveal it was a jealous lover had given him that cut. Ketrian Altronel was definitely not the forgiving kind.

It had to have been years since he'd last seen her. He often wondered if she ever asked after him. But no, he knew she'd have lost herself to her work. He'd never known anyone who could become so passionate about metal alloys. She was a brilliant metallurgist; he'd heard she'd recently been promoted to head of her department. Working for the Empire. And probably devoted to the Empire, too. Anyone who could back her revolutionary scientific theories with generously funded research grants would certainly win her favor.

Stars alone knew what she might have invented by now; she rarely knew what day it was when some idea had hold of her. It was as well she could find solace in her work, Mak mused, feeling the accustomed twinge of guilt. Maybe he should have tried harder to contact her, to explain. It had hurt him to think she believed he'd abandoned her.

A beeping from his flight computer brought Mak out of his reminiscing. His R2 unit informed him they were coming up on Karatha. As the star lines streaked back into place about him, Mak could find none of his usual relief to be safely home. Ahead of him, just about to disappear into Karatha's blue-green atmosphere, Mak counted one fighter missing. For all his stern discipline, Mak loved his men, did his best to protect them. He'd been proud of his low casualty rate. Until today.

Mak's hand trembled as he checked his sensors, grief evaporating in a white-hot inferno of pure rage. There were those responsible for Gifford's death, complacent, safe in their command council seats, sending young men to battle with failing equipment and even worse intelligence reports. It looked to be a lovely bright day down there, a new day Gifford would not see.

Early morning sea-fogs had melted away from the towering limestone cliffs that held the Eyrie. That was the pilots' name for the natural sink-hole that housed the base's main hangar two levels above the living quarters that bordered the sandy beach below. A far cry from the icy nightmare Mak recalled before his transfer here from Hoth. But they'd had more food, more fuel, more personnel on Hoth.

Mak's rage peaked as he remembered the pre-dawn call-up by fighter command. They'd had word from intelligence of a straying Imperial supply carrier. All the squadrons were excited about that, but Mak and his fellow leaders had been refused the extra fighters they believed they would need to ensure the carrier's capture. They couldn't afford the time needed to finish repairs on those downed Xwings -- even if they had the necessary parts. Intelligence had assured them they would meet little opposition. Now Gifford was dead, and they were returning empty-handed.

Today would be the last time they would be sent out underprepared. Mak swore it would not happen again. Swinging his X-wing about so that it swooped home along the sea-cliffs like one of the native birds of prey, Mak determined to deliver that oath to Intelligence Commander Baran without delay. Slag the orders! Fighter command could wait to debrief him. Who knows? He might even have cooled down a little by then, but he doubted it. One glance at Gifford's empty place would be enough to insure that.

He took savage pleasure in rehearsing a blistering speech, his R2 droid doing much of the work as the X-wing was guided down and into the hangar. Mak was climbing up and out of his seat as soon as the canopy slid back.

"Sorry, Mak," he heard someone say softly behind him as his boots met the tarmac. "Dallin said you did all you could."

"Yeah?" Mak snarled. He swung about, confronting Merinda, the tiny female tech who was leader of his ground crew. Even the genuine concern in her ovoid green eyes could not cool his temper. "Well, it wasn't enough," he shouted. "And this time," he hefted an accusing forefinger, "those incompetent chair-polishers aren't getting away with it." He stormed off toward the turbolift that would take him down to Command Center.

"Wait, Mak!" Merinda jogged to keep up with him. "Think!" She grabbed at his arm, slowing him a little. She knew that even in a rage he was too much of a gentleman to push her aside. The turbolift was full and she took her chance as he was forced to wait. "What good will it do you to get demoted again? You remember what happened last time."

Mak glared at her, ready to tell her he didn't care. But that wasn't true; not being squadron leader left less able men to protect his pilots. "Slag it, Merin," he said, suddenly weary. "I've got to do something!" Frustrated, he ran a hand through his disarrayed hair.

"I know," she said sympathetically, "and I agree. But you need a plan if you're to have any real impact on that idiot, Barren-Brain."

The familiar disparaging name for Commander Baran brought a faint smile to Mak's lips. "A plan, huh?" he said. He waved his chief tech into the turbolift as it opened for them. "You're up to something. Give!"

She did so, laying out her ideas for confronting command with a scheme to secure experts who could manufacture needed replacement parts on Karatha rather than having the squadrons go raiding for them.

"It sure beats anything Baran's come up with lately," Mak agreed as they stepped out of the lift again.

"Thanks a million," Merinda said sourly. "A newt-worm could outthink Baran."

"I didn't mean ... " He saw her grin and realized she was teasing again, trying to trigger his "high-falutin' manners."

"It's just that I know what Baran will say."

"Me, too." She imitated Baran's prim and proper tone. "And just where are all these eager-to-defect experts you've been hiding from us, Chief? Under your bed? In your tool kit?"

"Expert!" Mak exclaimed, coming to a halt so suddenly that Merinda collided with him. "That's it. I should have thought of it sooner."

"What?" she demanded.

"Not what. Who," he declared, smiling. "Ketrian Altronel."

* * *

He looks nothing like his son, Ketrian thought sourly. She stood on the far side of Arginall Refinery's small office, observing Imperial Governor Makintay's expression as he tried to comprehend the computer diagnostics. Never did, but all those dinner parties aren't helping.

"Pompous old fool," Alikka Nolan whispered to Ketrian. "He hasn't the faintest idea of what he's looking at." As personnel supervisor she was expected to be present for the evaluation of Altronel's alloy sample.

"No," Ketrian replied, leaning down to her shorter fair-haired friend, "but he sure does." She indicated the middle-aged uniformed Imperial seated beside the governor.

Major Nial Pedrin was commander of the Arginall garrison attached to the refinery. Also a qualified geologist, he'd been given this posting when the Empire discovered Hargeeva's mineral wealth. Variety and individuality were Pedrin's pet hates. Naturally his only other interest was geology -- stone never changed. Or at least it did not unless it was brought in to one of Ketrian's laboratories.

Today's sample was the result of her work on a mineral known as ostrine. After months of trying various combinations, Ketrian had uncovered the correct trace elements and come up with a revolutionary method of crystalline and plas-bonding that made the raw ostrine about as different as it could get. Pedrin's eyes widened further with each line he read. He picked the alloy sample up from the desk, his fingers almost seeming to caress it.

Alikka shifted impatiently. Pedrin glanced up at her, his spaceblack eyes funereal beneath his thin brows, penetrating. Alikka held his gaze steadily. The two shared as much mutual animosity as did Ketrian and the governor.

"Well?" Governor Makintay prompted.

"It seems suitable to me." Pedrin's burning eyes moved to him and the older man flushed. Makintay may be governor, but it was Pedrin who wielded the true power on Hargeeva. "Of course, you're the expert." Chastened, Makintay lowered his double chin onto his red satina-clothed chest. Pedrin disapproved of the Hargeevan aristocracy's traditional dress.

Pedrin put the alloy back on the desk, and lifted his forefinger to press down his already smooth mustache. "A remarkable piece of work," he said. His eyes gleamed with reflected computer light as he looked up at Ketrian. "Remarkable."

Not since her university days had Ketrian heard such open praise. "Thank you, Major," she said. She could feel herself blushing and knew her face must match her hair-color. "Finding the exact formula to increase the heat absorption ten-fold like that was ... "

"No doubt," he interrupted, getting to his feet. His stormtrooper guard moved to open the door behind the women. "As of now these findings are classified top secret. You understand?" They nodded. "Top secret," he repeated, his hard eyes settling on Alikka. "Not a word to anyone outside this complex. There are severe penalties for loose talk. I would not want to have to remind you of those penalties a second time, Supervisor."

Alikka's gray eyes flashed defiance. "And just who do you think would be interested? You've already imprisoned ... "

"You'll want to relay those diagnostics to your superiors immediately, I suppose?" Ketrian changed the subject.

Pedrin nodded, his eyes still on Alikka.

"Then we'll leave you to it. It's all there, ready for downloading. Alikka and I have a dinner appointment in town." She took her friend's arm.

"The Lantern Inn again?" Pedrin asked.

Ketrian sighed irritably. "Yes. Must you have your men follow us wherever we go?"

"It is for your own protection," he said, "never forget that."

* * *

Ketrian's small apartment adjoined the refinery complex, as did all the living quarters. She found that convenient, but Alikka complained it was like living in a prison. There was only one gate in the surrounding, high duracrete walls, always heavily guarded. Up on the walkways the troopers' white armor was burnished by the setting sun.

Ketrian opened her front door and left Alikka in the living room. She had bought a new dress and was eager to change out of her coveralls. Moments later, straightening the vee neckline and adjusting her unpinned hair, she left the bathroom. "Well?" she asked. "Do you think your mystery spacer merchant will like it?"

Alikka replaced the coralline sculpture she had been admiring. She'd told Ketrian the merchant carried new stock, and arranged this meeting. "Oh, yes. Very much." She smiled then turned back to the shelves lining the living room. "Are you sure you can find room for any more?"

Ketrian laughed as she picked up her coat. "There's always room for more."

"Maybe if you moved all those awful swords and knives from the other wall?"

Ketrian moved to it, considering. She reached out to touch one of the smaller swords, a fencing foil. The first time she'd seen Stevan Makintay he'd been giving a demonstration with that sword. He moved with all the sure grace of a feline.

Watching the softening of Ket's expression, Alikka wondered if she were doing the right thing, deceiving Ket. But Ali had to do her best to aid the Rebellion.

"No," Ketrian said, "too many memories." She'd bet Mak never spared her a thought. His only true love was the stars. He'd certainly been eager to abandon her for them. "Come on," she pulled on her coat, "we'll be late."

They stepped outside and into their waiting speeder, annoyed as always to see another speeder a short distance behind. Pedrin's watchers.

When they arrived at the Lantern Inn, Ketrian was further annoyed to find Grathal, a familiar antiques dealer, waiting for them. He explained that the interstellar merchant didn't like to display his wares in public -- especially with Imperial officials nearby. Customs excise could ruin him. Grathal showed them a back exit through the storage cellar.

"I don't know about this," Ketrian said nervously as they stepped out into the damp night air.

"Oh, come on," Alikka urged. "Where's your spirit of adventure? He's a smuggler. How romantic."

"Well," Ketrian decided as Grathal guided them to his speeder, "it will be good to get away from Pedrin's clowns for a while. They're probably just coming in the front door now."

Grathal drove them deeper into the more squalid sectors by the river and finally stopped in a gloomy alleyway by a dilapidated warehouse. Grathal opened the speeder door, letting in the foggy air.

"People disappear in these parts," Ketrian said sourly, "then their bodies wash up in the harbor."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic." Alikka pushed her out. "Aren't you the one who's so good with knives?"

"Yes. But I don't wear them with a dress."

Grathal guided them to the warehouse's side door and they stepped inside. The room was low-ceilinged, closed in by cracked rust-metal walls, and smelled of damp and fish. In the center stood a rickety table over which hung a single glow rod. About the table stood two men and a youth in various ill-matched drab clothing. On the table stood some datacards, a holo-projector, and datapads.

"Who are they?" Ketrian asked Grathal. "I thought this was an exclusive showing? Where are the samples?"

There was a creaking as a rear door opened. A tall man in a blue jacket entered -- Ketrian surmised he was the merchant. He wore a blaster low on his right thigh. Ketrian checked and noted that the other people were similarly armed.

"Hello, Ketrian," the merchant said, turning to her. There was a thin white scar high on his cheek. "It's been a long time."

"Mak!" Ketrian exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" She turned angrily to Alikka. "Did you know about this? What's going on here?"

"I knew," Alikka admitted somewhat guiltily. "He said he needs to talk to you, to explain ... "

"Explain!" Ketrian snapped. "Explain what? That he's fooled you the way he fooled me. Is that the truth of it, Mak? Are you here to start another peasant revolt? Didn't you have your fill of blood and death last time? I see you've found more martyrs for your cause." She waved an arm at the group by the table. "Are they ready to die just so you can get even with your father?"

"Well," he drawled, making his way to the table, "I see you haven't changed."

She stared at him. "I'm leaving."

"Please..." Alikka stepped between her and the door. Grathal was nowhere in sight. "Stay, Ket. For me. For my brother." Ket knew he was in one of Pedrin's labor camps. "I wanted you to come here more than any of these people. I couldn't tell you about it where we might be overheard."

"Oh, Ali," Ketrian sighed. "What are you up to now? You know Pedrin suspects you."

"It's as well someone's trying to prevent more Alderaans," a highpitched youthful voice said from the table.

Ketrian turned to the speaker, the young man. "Don't tell me you believe those lies?"

"Which?" he threw back at her. "That Alderaan was planning germ warfare? That we all had an incurable plague? That ... "

"Enough, Merak." A graying man moved to place his hand to the youth's shoulder. "We share your pain, and your mourning for your lost home."

Ketrian stared. "You're Alderaanian?"

He nodded proudly. "One of the few."

Mak stepped forward. "All Merak asks is that you hear him out. He has some holo-tapes he wants you to see." Ketrian looked uncertain. "Not just Alderaan. The Empire's been busy lately."

"So," Ketrian said slowly, "You're working with them now?"

"The Rebel Alliance?" Mak said. "Yes. Best move I ever made. For once in my life I've found the means to really help people. Hear us out, Ket. That's all we ask. Then if you still want, you can go."

Ketrian stiffened angrily. "This ... " she indicated the holomachine, "is the only reason you came here?"

"No," he smiled. It was the same heart-wrenching, gentle smile she remembered. "This was a neat excuse, a chance for me to see you again. Merak and the team could have handled it, but I talked my way in. I've never stopped thinking about you, Ket. About the day I was forced to leave you."

"Forced!" she sneered. "You ran away from your father's threats. Ran to your precious stars. Your father couldn't bear having you marry a lowborn instead of that lady he chose for you. I thought you were willing to stand by me, but you abandoned me."

"We have evidence of the truth behind Makintay's disappearance too," another of the Rebels spoke up. "Your would-be husband spent a year in a penal colony on Garen IV after he was kidnapped and dumped there with a false ID."

"Penal colony?" Ketrian wanted to believe, to heal that old wound.

Mak nodded sadly. "My father made sure I vanished someplace where I'd never be heard of again." He picked up one of the datacards. "Eventually I escaped and came back here to lead that uprising. When it failed, the Alliance contacted me. It's all here."

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

He shrugged. "Officially, I was an escaped felon. All I earned from the uprising was a death mark. You were secure, working for the Empire."

She held his gaze for a long moment, then looked away. "So many people suffered needlessly for your uprising. Can't you see the Rebel Alliance is no different? All this making war is futile, Mak. Futile. I'll hear what your friends have to say, that's all."

"Fair enough," Mak agreed, waving her to a chair.

* * *

"It's no use, Ali," Mak said an hour later. "She's made up her mind."

"Your Alliance is no different than the Empire," Ketrian repeated, glaring at the group about the holo-projector. "You're only interested in what I can do for you. And you," she turned to Makintay, "all you care about is your X-wing repairs."

"How can you go on working for Palpatine after what we've shown you?" Merak demanded.

"I knew he wasn't perfect," Ketrian told him. "He's human, like all of us. Given the same unlimited power, who can say your leaders would not become just as corrupt?" She picked up her coat. "I've been here too long already. Pedrin's goons will be asking questions. Where's Grathal?"

"He had to get back," Mak said. "We have another speeder hidden nearby. I'll drive you to the inn." Ketrian stormed past him as he opened the door. "Don't mind her," he told Merak, "that was her standard argument. It's easy to think of no one but yourself if you label everyone else as worthless."

Ketrian hesitated, then stalked outside. It was raining and she pulled her coat hood about her face. Makintay and Alikka said nothing as they joined her.

They'd gone only a few paces when Mak suddenly stopped. He cocked his head and peered up into the night sky. "Listen," he said. Then they heard it too, the roar of airspeeders. On Hargeeva only the Imperial military used airspeeders. Searchlights settled on the warehouse and its surroundings.

"Slag!" Mak cursed. "They've found us. Come one. This way. Hurry!" He pulled them into a narrow connecting alley.

Behind them a blaster battle erupted as the trapped Rebels returned fire. Then a mighty explosion filled the streets with a flare of light.

"What was that?" Alikka said.

"We can't help them now." Mak said grimly, urging her forward. He skidded to a halt at the next corner. "Troopers," he snarled. "They found our speeder." He drew his blaster, looking set to make a fight of it.

Ketrian stared at him. "What are you trying to do, get me killed? I've got nothing to hide." She made to step around him.

"You think they'll believe that?" Mak pulled her back. But too late, the movement had been seen. A blaster bolt impacted where Ketrian had stood.

"Drop your weapons and step clear of the building," the ranking trooper called.

"Now look what you've done," Ketrian wailed. "They think I'm a Rebel, too."

"They've got us trapped," Mak cursed. "When those speeders show up, they'll blast us. There's only one way out. You two will have to be my prisoners. Hostages, okay?"

"Hostages?" Ketrian gaped at him.

"Good idea," Alikka said, then to Ketrian, "it's our only chance." The trooper repeated his command for them to surrender, and added, "This is your final warning." Overhead, they could hear an airspeeder closing, its lights turning night into day.

Mak didn't need that illumination to see Ketrian's face -- she had gone as white as snow. "I'm sorry, Ket," he said. "Come on." Mak put an arm about Ket's throat and shoved Ali forward with the blaster.

A searcher light immediately blinded them all and a snarling voice called, "Drop that weapon, Rebel."

"Back off or I kill them," Makintay shouted.

The Imperials didn't allow him a moment for negotiation. The ground trooper and another in the speeder fired in unison, sending concentric blue power ripples through the rain. Ketrian felt Makintay try to shield her, then the stun blast darkness became complete.

* * *

The next Ketrian knew stark white light was filtering through her eyelids and the acrid smell of antiseptic assailed her nostrils. Her stomach heaved and she rolled to one side.

"Please use the waste unit," a droid's unemotional voice echoed about her.

Ketrian fell from the narrow bunk onto a duracrete floor that bruised her knees. She grabbed at the nearby waste unit, turned and threw up into it.

"Thank you," the droid responded. There was a whirring of servomotors as he came closer. Long metal arms heaved her back onto the bunk. "You are functional?" it asked, glowing photoreceptors and sensors assessing.

"Oh, go melt your circuits." Ketrian wiped at her mouth. "Who are you and where am I?"

"Medical guard unit FM-6B at your service," he replied. "You are in Arginall Garrison Infirmary Cell number 23B."

"Cell!" Ketrian felt worse than ever as it all came back. "I am going to murder you, Makintay." She clutched at her head. "If I live."

"You are experiencing head pain?" the droid asked.

"How do I get out of here?" Ketrian demanded. "Open the door." She saw all four walls were completely smooth. No sign of an exit.

"I cannot do that," the droid answered. "You must be given proper clearance. First I have been programmed to provide medication that will hasten your return to full function."

Ketrian saw an appendage appear with a ready-filled hypodermic. "What is that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Standard treatment for your condition."

"Good," Ketrian sighed in relief. As she rolled up her sleeve, she found her new dress was torn and covered in mud. The hypo-spray discharged its load into her arm. She rubbed at it and asked, "Where is my friend, Alikka Nolan?"

"I am not programmed with that information," the droid responded.

Part of the wall slid open to reveal stormtrooper guards in a corridor. Then Major Pedrin stepped into the cell. "I see you've had your medication." His lips twitched in what could have been a smile. "Feeling better?" He pressed at his mustache as he lowered himself to sit on the single chair. "I've been worried about you, Ketrian, You received a double dose of stun shock."

"You should teach your troopers to shoot straight," Ketrian said angrily. "They could have killed me. Is that how you tell them to handle hostage situations? Where's Ali? She better be all right or I'll be making an official complaint."

Pedrin's eyes darkened to twin black holes. "You are in no position to make complaints, Miss Altronel. You and your friend deliberately avoided your guards at the inn. If not for the

fact that they noticed the man who took you to the storage cellar and questioned him upon his return, we may never have located you."

"Grathal?" Ketrian's pulse raced and her mouth went dry as she wondered what the old man had told them. "Where is he now? I'd like to ask him a few things myself."

"Such as?" Pedrin leaned forward and she noticed he was recording her answers on a datapad.

"Such as how he could have managed to get so confused. He took us to the wrong address. Way back by the river. Ali and I thought we were meeting a sculpture dealer from off-world. You know how I collect such things?" He nodded. "I know we shouldn't have left without notifying your men, but Grathal said the dealer was worried about ... "

"Customs excise?"

"Yes," Ketrian sighed in relief. "Grathal explained?"

"That is what he told us, but it was not the full truth."

Ketrian swallowed. "It wasn't?"

"Who did you find waiting at that warehouse?"

"People," Ketrian said. She brushed mud from her skirt. They must have captured Makintay and identified him by now. "Resistance fighters. They wanted me to join them." She made it sound like a great joke. "Me. Can you imagine? When I refused they took Ali and me prisoner."

Pedrin said nothing for a long moment. Then he sighed, straightened and turned off the recorder. "Loyalty is an admirable trait, Ketrian," he said quietly, "but you cannot protect Miss Nolan forever. She knew where she was taking you last night."

"Surely not."

Pedrin gave her a stern look. "She knew. You see now why you needed my officers with you at all times?"

She nodded. "I'm glad they were able to rescue me. May I go home now?"

"Soon. First I want you to tell me all you know about Stevan Makintay. You and he declared your betrothal five years ago." He snorted disgustedly and said, "Makintay's father doesn't let a day go by without complaining of his son's choice. He wanted Stevan to marry some High Lady, I take it?" Ketrian nodded. Pedrin gave another of his reptilian smiles.

"Personally, I'd say that was the single smart choice of Stevan's life."

Ketrian flushed. "I have work to do, Major. I should be getting back to the refinery. I don't think there is much I can tell you about Makintay. He abandoned me five years ago and I never heard from him again until last night."

"Yes," Pedrin agreed. "Of that, at least, we are certain. We had you both under close surveillance during your university days." Ketrian's head lifted in shock. "Security, you understand. We were assessing the elder Makintay for appointment to the position of Imperial Governor."

"And did you leave off that surveillance when Stevan disappeared?" Ketrian asked angrily.

"No," Pedrin admitted calmly. "You had become of strategic importance to the Empire by then also." She drew an angry breath and he lifted a hand to forestall her protest. "It was continued surveillance that allowed me to guarantee my superiors that you have no ties to the resistance movement." Ketrian sat back. "Now, about the prisoner. I find him quite a puzzle. Why would a man of such high breeding throw away all the privileges of his birth to aid these low-life Rebels? Unfortunately Makintay is the sole survivor of the group you met and he is proving to be ... " he paused, his lips pursing into a thin line of annoyance, "... stubborn. Most stubborn. Even his father had no success with him."

"The governor spoke to him?" Ketrian blurted. "He vowed never to do so again the night he disinherited Stevan."

"Yes," Pedrin murmured. "But Makintay Senior is governor for the Empire, and as such he must obey Imperial command. He was ordered to offer his son full reinstatement of his birthright should he co-operate with us and reveal the location of the Rebel base."

"Mak would never accept such an offer."

"Mak?" Pedrin cocked an eyebrow at her. "You know him well. He was most offensive. His father left in a rage. Young Makintay left me no alternative but to try drugs."

Ketrian swallowed hard. "Drugs? Then you have the location?" Pedrin's knuckles went white as he clutched at his datapad.

"No, it seems Makintay has been thoroughly prepared for this mission. Our drugs could not penetrate his obstinance. But that is of no consequence, we are currently employing more effective interrogation procedures." Pedrin's hooded eyes were full of perverse pleasure. "Makintay will break before another day dawns."

Shocked, Ketrian could do no more than stare.

Pedrin frowned. "I take it there is nothing you can tell me about him that might aid my questioning?"

Ketrian shook her head.

Pedrin got to his feet. "Well, I'm sure your aid won't be needed. Makintay proved his cowardice when he held you as a shield last night. You'd best go home. Rest. You have a long journey to make tomorrow."

"J-journey?" Ketrian said, dazed.

"Your alloy, Ketrian. It has caused considerable excitement among my superiors. They have commanded that you be transferred to Coruscant to continue your work under more secure conditions."

* * *

After a sleepless night full of fear for herself and her friends, Ketrian was escorted to the starport. Pedrin was sullen and rumped, as if he, too, had had little sleep. "I envy you," he said as he led her up the ramp to the waiting shuttle. "The Imperial capital. I was hoping I could get away from this backwater myself. I'm sure command would reward me if I could supply the location of the Rebel base."

"Oh?" Ketrian was pleased. "Makintay wouldn't talk?"

Pedrin scowled. "He would have if I'd had more time. Command says their experts will make him talk. Experts, pah! If I had their scan grids and fancy torture machines I could ... "

"Torture?" Ketrian paled. "Makintay is being transferred, too?"

Pedrin turned and pointed to the foot of the ramp. A squad of stormtroopers surrounded a single prisoner. "Even he's getting off this rock."

Horried, Ketrian watched as the troopers dragged a groggy, chained Makintay up the ramp. As they paused at the hatchway, Ketrian got a good look at Makintay's face. It was a mass of bruises, and his shirt was splattered with blood.

"Morning," he croaked in greeting, trying to find a smile.

"Silence!" His guard prodded him with a rifle butt. Makintay fell forward into the shuttle.

"Surely you cannot feel sympathy for him?" Pedrin said, noting Ketrian's stricken expression.

She shook her head: "I was thinking of Ali. Where is she?"

Pedrin shifted uncomfortably. "We will hold her until she gives us the names of her accomplices."

"Is she being beaten too?"

"I would advise you to forget your traitor friend." He took her arm. "Come, the shuttle is powering up."

She pulled free. "If I could get that location for you, would you let Ali go?"

"Of course."

"Then give me clearance to talk to Makintay aboard the transport."

"You'll have it." Pedrin smiled.

* * *

Staring at the featureless gray walls of his tiny cell aboard the transport, Makintay decided that at least here he was being left alone. He marked time by the automatic dispensing of his rations every eight hours. Three times now. It seemed the transport's drive system was not in good shape. They were making frequent stops and short jumps. Fine by him, he was in no hurry.

The only positive thought he could find was knowing he'd convinced Ketrian he had not abandoned her. That and the look on her face when she'd seen him on the shuttle pad. She'd begun to feel again, the old spark was back in those lovely eyes.

Mak jumped as the cell door whooshed open. Silently the stormtrooper guards pushed him from the cell and marched him down the corridor to a small room. Its only furnishing was a chair fitted with restraints. The troopers pushed him into it, arranging him so that the electronic clamps activated, securing both arms and legs. Then they left him.

He waited, growing ever more nervous. The door opened and Ketrian entered. "Ket," he said with relief.

"You got me in a lot of trouble back there," she said. "You owe me."

"I'm not exactly in a position to grant favors." He noticed she didn't seem able to keep still, wringing her hands, pacing, fidgeting. Muscles jumped in her cheeks and the bare forearms showing below the jumpsuit's short sleeves. Her eyes glowed feverishly and her skin was an unhealthy greenish-yellow. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She stopped pacing and stared at him. "Okay? Oh, sure, I've never been better. I love being stunned, hauled in for questioning, and forced to leave my home."

He held her gaze. "I'm sorry, Ket. Truly sorry."

"And that's supposed to make everything all right?" She turned her back, grabbed at her elbows and began trembling from head to toe.

Mak frowned. She'd been through a rough time, but he'd been with her through worse times. He'd never seen her shake like that. Her posture and behavior reminded him of something ... of someone. "Are you sure you're not sick?" he repeated.

She swung back. "I've been throwing up ever since we left Hargeeva. This ship is jumping around so much, I can't stand it."

"Hyperspace never made you sick before. Maybe it was the stunshock."

"No," she resumed her pacing. "They fixed that back at the garrison."

Mak felt a chill run through him. Now he remembered where he'd seen similar symptoms. "They fixed you up? How?"

"Pedrin's med-droid gave me a shot. Happy? I wouldn't have needed it if you hadn't dragged me into this mess."

"No," he said slowly. "No, you wouldn't. You came here to ask me a favor?"

She nodded, began to speak but a sudden loud groaning from the hyperdrive engines drowned her out. The bulkheads creaked with transmitted strain, then steadied again. "Cursed garbage scow. It'll probably fall to pieces before we make the next stop." Tears filled her eyes. "And I don't think I'd care."

Mak wished he was free to hold her. "They told you about Alikka?" he guessed. She nodded. "Slag! She was a fine lady. I swear she didn't suffer, Ket. The drugs overloaded her heart."

Ketrian stared at him, her face managing to pale further. "What are you talking about? Pedrin told me she was still being questioned."

Mak cursed. "Filthy liar. I'm sorry, Ket. There's no mistake. We were in the same cell. I ... I held her as she died. She was talking about you, worried for you." Ketrian gaped at him, then began sobbing. Helpless, he could offer no comfort. "You see what your Empire does to people?"

"My Empire? It's not my Empire. It never has been."

"You work for them."

Ketrian's blue eyes flashed pure fury. "It was your cursed Alliance that killed Alikka." She gulped back a sob. "Pedrin said he'd let her go if ... "

"If I gave you the answers he wants?"

She nodded guiltily. "I only wanted to save Alikka."

"Oh, Ket. Don't you see? That's just how she felt. She wanted to save her brother, to save all the other victims of the Empire. To make sure there's never another Alderaan."

A deafening explosion rumbled through the deckplates that threw Ketrian from her feet. The transport shuddered and shook like an animal in its death throes. Then suddenly it went very still and quiet. Mak realized the drive had cut out. They were back in realspace.

He looked to Ketrian who was climbing unsteadily to her feet. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "What happened?"

"I think we've been sabotaged. I used to fly freight along these routes, they're thick with ..."

"Pirates!" someone shouted out in the corridor. A terrified naval ensign stuck his head in the door. "We're being boarded. Better get back to your cabin, Miss."

"What about him?" Ketrian indicated Makintay.

"Leave him. The troopers have all gone forward to battle the pirates. Come on, I have to escort you to your cabin. Hurry."

"I can't," she called. "I fell and hurt my ankle. Help me." The youngster came over and made to prop her up, then crumpled as she hit him hard with something she'd taken from her pocket.

Mak stared at her. She smiled nervously, opened her hand and revealed a piece of dull blue metal. "My new alloy. Pedrin told me to keep it secure."

The ship shuddered and they heard the sound of metal meeting metal as the pirates docked. Then a cacophony of battle sounds reverberated through the corridors.

"Get me out of this thing," Mak said, struggling against his restraints. She hit the release switch and he fell to the deck. As he sprawled on the deckplates, Mak noticed the pistol in the unconscious ensign's holster. Commenting, "while I'm down here," Mak grabbed the weapon then scrambled to his feet.

"What now?" Ketrian asked.

"We hotfoot it outta here and find an escape pod." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door: He leaned out, checked the corridor. "Clear. Come on."

"No, wait," she protested. "If anyone sees you in that outfit, they'll blast you." Makintay looked in dismay at his bright-colored prison clothes. Ketrian nodded at the unconscious man. "He looks about your size."

Mak grinned. "That's the woman I love." Impulsively he pulled her to him and kissed her.

"You do?"

"Always have," he said intently, holding her gaze. "But first I gotta get you outta here."

"Hey," she laughed, "who's rescuing who?" A spasm of nausea doubled her over. Makintay held her and as she met his gaze she saw naked fear in his eyes. Fear for her.

* * *

They had not gone far before they realized they would need to find a less public route if they didn't want to be caught in the crossfire. The Imperials were rapidly losing ground against a better armed and more ferocious opponent.

"What are they?" Ketrian whispered, peering over Mak's shoulder as they crouched low in a shadow-filled fire equipment alcove.

"The ones that look like overgrown scaly swamp creatures are called Ghawems," he said. "We gotta steer clear of them. They'll be spouting methane gas from their backpacks. Come to think of it, they've probably already flooded the upper decks with the stuff. Slag! We'll have to find some breathers. Maybe I can grab one from one of the little blue furry guys."

"Wh-what?" she stammered as another wave of nausea swept through her. What was wrong with her? She was shaking almost constantly. She wasn't that scared.

"The Myills," he explained, turning to her. "They're sorta slaves of the Ghawems. They do all the dirty work. They'll be bringing up the rear and they breathe oxygen. Wait here."

"No way. I'm coming with you." She tried to stand but had to grab at the bulkhead.

"No point," he told her. "I'll have to come back this way anyhow and you need to rest. Give me that knife." She had claimed the weapon from a dead crewman and didn't look happy about giving it up. "I'm not leaving you unarmed," he explained. "I need it to work these bolts loose." He stood aside so she could see an engineering access cover on the bulkhead. "If I'm right, it opens onto a real maze of tunnels carrying all kinds of conduits. You'll be safe in there." She gave him the knife, and moments later he dropped the cover to the deck. The clang it made as it hit was lost to the background din of blaster shots, explosions and screams. He helped Ketrian climb up and in. "Don't wander off. I'll be back."

"You'd b-better be." She reached out and touched the scar on his cheek. "Be careful."

He took her hand. "You're as cold as ice. Here, take this coat." He shrugged out of it, handed it to her and replaced the access cover. Then he disappeared out into the corridor, pistol at the ready.

* * *

Cowering in the pitch-black tunnel, Ketrian waited. Time passed and she grew more and more cold, glad for Mak's coat, certain it was all that kept her from freezing to death. Surely he should have been back by now. What if he didn't come? No, he would not abandon her, he never had. He said he loved her -- did she still love him?

Scrabbling sounds at the access cover filled her with terror. Had the pirates found her? She clutched hard at her knife. The cover fell back, flooding her hiding place with greenish, foul-smelling air. "Ketrian?" Mak called. "Are you there?"

"Wh-where else..." she coughed and choked. Makintay climbed up to her and clamped a breath mask over her face. She gulped pure, sweet air. Mak turned away and she heard him fumbling to replace the access cover. "Hey," she protested. "I thought we were leaving?"

Ketrian's surroundings became clearly visible as he lit a glow rod. She blinked as she got a good look at him. Blood ran from a shallow cut on his brow and he had some new bruises to add to the old. Several emergency survival packs were strapped about his now grimy uniform.

"I've got good news and I've got bad news," he told her, making an obvious effort to cheer her.

"Tell me," she sighed.

"The Imperials won't be bothering us anymore, but all the escape pods are gone."

"What? We can't stay here. What are we going to do?"

"Never fear," he winked. "I have a plan."

She groaned.

* * *

"So you see," Makintay repeated some minutes later, "we've got all the supplies we need. All we gotta do is stay here and sneak out when they make port."

She scowled. "Oh, sure. We walk off this ship right into some pirate enclave. Great plan."

"Hey." He gave her a wounded look. "We don't know that they're heading for home. They might have a buyer lined up someplace."

"Right." She shivered harder. "I hope we don't have to stay here too long. It's freezing in here."

"It's not that cold, Ket," he sounded worried. "You're sick. If you get any worse, I'm gonna have to get you some help."

"From them?" she gaped.

"Yeah, why not? I did some deals with ol' Uskgarv in my traderpilot days."

"Uskgarv?"

"The esteemed leader of this motley bunch of pirates," he explained. "If we don't make landfall someplace in the next few hours, I'll talk to him. You don't look so good."

"Are you crazy?" she protested. "We don't have any bargaining power."

"Oh, yes, we do," Mak said quietly. "You're worth a fortune to the Empire."

"Ransom." He nodded and she thought that over. "I suppose, but I'm not keen on working for them anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. He drew her down to lean against his shoulder. "Had any other offers lately?"

She smiled. "One."

"And?"

"And it's looking better all the time." His arms closed about her.

* * *

She woke some time later feeling sicker than ever in her life. Shuddering with fever, she looked up into Mak's eyes and saw her own fear reflected there. "What's wrong with me?" She saw his expression change. "You know, don't you?"

He sighed heavily. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you. I've seen this before, with defectors who arrived at Eyrie Base."

"I d-don't understand."

"Poison, Ket." She stiffened with fear. "It's okay, there's an antidote. The problem is how to get you to it. We're outta time. I gotta go talk to Uskgarv. They should have some of the stuff in this transport's sickbay. Pedrin would have made sure of that. Just in case there were any delays getting you to Coruscant."

"He poisoned me?"

Mak nodded. "The med-droid, remember? It's standard Imperial procedure for keeping useful people from becoming useful defectors or healthy Alliance prisoners."

Pure fury flooded Ketrian's veins. "I wish Pedrin had been allowed to come on this trip. Maybe the pirates would let me dismember him."

Makintay chuckled. "Hold that thought." He moved back toward the access. "I'm gonna go get us some better accommodations."

* * *

"Good news and bad news again?" Ketrian asked as Mak returned a second time. "Where's Uskgarv?"

"Gone," he said, looking both pleased and sad. "There's only a few Myills and their bosses out there. They're stripping anything of value and loading it on a freighter. They're in a real panic. Attack ships are heading this way. Imperial rescuers, I suppose. You'll be okay, Ket. As soon as they secure the transport, you'll have that antidote."

"And what about you?" she asked, squeezing his arm.

He shrugged: "I stick to plan A. Hide in here, hope they count me among the dead, then jump ship first chance I get."

"I don't want to go back to the Empire," she repeated. "But even more, I don't want to leave you again." She kissed him. "You say those shots the ship's doctor's been giving me were to keep the poisoning under control?" He nodded. "Right then. Sounds to me like it's not too dangerous out there now. I'll go up to sickbay. I know the stuff they've been giving me. I'll grab a load of it and bring it back here. Then I can stay in hiding with you."

He stared at her. "I don't know. Sounds risky."

"Life with you is always risky," she said. "That's the way I want it. I'm not taking no for an answer. It's not just us ... I can give my new alloy to the Alliance. For Ali."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then said in quiet agreement, "For Ali." Ketrian made to move forward and he took her arm, steadying her. "We did a lot of ducking and weaving through the corridors out there. Can you find the way?"

She gave him a wry smile. "I've become very familiar with this level recently. I must have paced every corridor a dozen times, trying to get up the nerve to talk to you, and trying to figure what to say when I did. I'll just head back to the main corridor then go forward and up two levels to sickbay. I know it well, too. Don't worry, I'll find it, even in all the murky air and emergency lighting."

Makintay nodded and helped her to the access. While he worked the cover free, Ketrian checked her jumpsuit pockets. "I'm not going out there without a knife," she told him as he turned to her. "I might come across a few of your pirate friends lurking about on the upper levels."

"We might at that," he said, firmly accenting the "we." He patted the pistol at his belt. "This will be useful, and maybe we can find one for you too." He made to climb down into the corridor but she grabbed him.

"No, Mak," she protested. "Please, stay here. It's too dangerous for you out there. If the Empire takes you prisoner again ... " she flinched and looked away. "Pedrin bragged about what they were going to do to you on Coruscant."

"I can imagine," Mak said sourly. He tilted her face up until she met his gaze. "No way are you going out there alone and sick. No problem. I'm a naval ensign," he tapped the insignia on his tunic. "Says so right here. This guy and all his pals are dead. I'll disappear long before anyone gets organized to do an ID check." She frowned uncertainly and he added, "Trust me."

She rolled her eyes beseechingly. "I knew you couldn't go much longer without saying that. All right, all right, lead on then. The sooner we get that medicine, the sooner I can get you back to your cozy little hidey-hole."

"You always did pick on my taste in interior decorating," he complained with mock insult, "I'm the one who grew up in a palace."

"Oh, do pardon me, Your Highness," she said and laughed. Mak reveled in the sound. He climbed out, then turned and lifted her into his arms, enjoying the feel of her as much as he did her laughter. How long had he waited to hold her, hoped to hear her laugh? Would he be forced to part with her again soon? Should he allow her to risk hiding out with him, being arrested and charged with treason if they found her with him? Conflicting emotions and arguments raced through his mind as he cautiously led the way to the end of the corridor. There, he paused and peered around the corner.

The methane gas seemed to be clearing, though they were still better off using breath masks. Ahead lay another corridor bathed in dim red light. Bloodied bodies littered the deckplates. Silence was broken only by sporadic, muffled sounds of blaster fire. Ketrian was right -- any stray pirates could easily be forced back this way. He and Ketrian best stay alert.

As they entered the main corridor, they were thrown off their feet by the shockwave of an explosion somewhere above and forward of them. "What was that?" Ketrian panted fearfully as she pushed herself to sit beside Makintay.

"Probably standard pirate tactics," he told her. "Booby trap the hatchways. Come to think of it, we'd better avoid the turbolifts too."

Ketrian groaned. "Stairs? Two whole levels?" She was already breathless and frighteningly weak as he helped her back to her feet.

"You're not doing any climbing," Mak said. "I'll carry you."

"No, you won't," she refused. "Hang onto that pistol. One of us has to be ready to fight. I'm in no shape to use this knife."

"You?" he teased. "The lady who can take off a bug's wing at a hundred paces? Well ... " He touched his forefinger to the scar below his eye. "Then again, I remember you do have your off days."

She bit back a smile. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Nope," he grinned, but the smile faded as he held her gaze and said softly, "All those long months in prison this scar was all I had to remind me of you."

"Oh, Mak," she whispered. Tenderly she traced the mark she'd given him in an accident caused by her jealousy. "If only I'd known where you were. I would have gotten you out of there. I swear it."

"I know you would have." He kissed her fingers. She was trembling with fever chills. "But right now it's me that has to get you out of here. Come on. Lean on me."

Gratefully, she did so. Later, halfway up a stairwell, she collapsed and was too weak to struggle free as he insisted on carrying her. At the exit door he lowered her gently to her feet.

"Wait here," he advised. "I'm gonna check around outside. I'm sure I heard something. Sounded like troopers."

"Then I should go and you wait," she panted.

"No," he repeated. He stepped hurriedly through the door before she had a chance to argue further. Thus distracted, he missed spotting the man crouched in hiding in a smoke-filled alcove further down the corridor. A blaster bolt hissed bare centimeters past his left shoulder and burned a hole in the bulkhead behind him. He instinctively dropped flat and rolled into the shelter on the other side, another volley of blaster bolts chasing him.

"Mak," Ketrian called fearfully. "Are you okay?"

The stairwell door slid open further. Ketrian was not fool enough to show herself but Mak knew her fear for him might drive her out. "Stay there," he shouted across, unable to see her from his position. Maybe the pirates would turn and run if he gave them enough motivation. He leaned out and fired a few shots, catching a quick glimpse of his targets as they tried to make ground toward him through the dim light. Not pirates, and not stormtroopers.

"What the ... ?" Mak muttered, both puzzled and hopeful. Those uniforms ... He risked sticking his head out for another look and very nearly had it shot off. "Hey," he cried, "you're Rebels."

"You bet we are," a familiar voice shouted back. "If you wanna stay in one piece, Imp, you'll toss that pistol into the corridor and come out with your hands up. Now."

"Okay, okay," Mak said happily. "I surrender. You win, Hal. It's me. Mak. I'm coming out. Don't shoot me." Pulling the breath mask from his face and grinning from ear to ear, he threw the pistol down and stepped into the corridor.

"It's me. Makintay," he repeated, holding his hands high over his head. "It wouldn't look good on your record if you blasted your squadron leader, Lieutenant Dallin."

"Mak," the pilot called in delighted recognition. "It is you, isn't it? What are you doing in that uniform?"

"Of course it's me," Mak laughed, coming closer but not daring to lower his arms. "The uniform suits me better than a prison outfit." More men stepped out behind Dallin. "Keto, Erik," Mak greeted. "Intelligence finally sent you guys to the right place for once."

"Intelligence, pah," corvette co-pilot Keto snorted. "We've been hoping we might run across your path ever since we heard you'd been captured and shipped out. We found this stray all by ourselves." The big burly black man poked the slack-jawed Dallin. "I think you better tell him he can put his hands down before he decided to have you demoted, Hal."

"Uh, yeah, right," Dallin mumbled.

"Mak?" Ketrian called from the stair exit. "What's going on out there?"

"We've been rescued, Ket," he called, moving to her. "Come on out and meet my friends."

* * *

Makintay leaned over the Rebel doctor's shoulder and watched as the hypodermic discharged its load into Ketrian's arm. "Are you sure that's the right stuff?" Mak asked anxiously.

The gray-haired Rebel sighed heavily. "I am a medic. I have been specifically trained to treat this poison. Have you?"

"Just checking," Mak said. He turned to Ketrian who was lying comfortably propped up on the sickbay bed. "How do you feel? You still look pale."

Ketrian shook her head in amusement and reached out and patted Makintay's hand. "I feel better than you will if you keep annoying the doctor. You can't expect the antidote to work that fast."

"Why not?" he said, then asked the medic. "How soon will she be back on her feet?"

"Mak," Ketrian chided. "Stop fussing and let the poor man tend the wounded. I'm fine and I'm not taking up this bed when there are others who need it more." She moved to sit up.

"Thank you, Miss Altrone," the medic smiled down at her. "Perhaps you could have the commander escort you back to your cabin. You should be feeling much better by the time we land on Eyrie."

"Eyrie?"

"Your new home," Mak told her. He bent to slide his arms beneath her and pick her up. "You're gonna love it. Warm and sunny. And we have our very own beach."

"Beach?" she said, pleased. Then she remembered to protest, "Put me down. I can walk."

"Uh-uh," he refused and kissed the top of her head. "Save your energy. You'll need it when the big brass find out about that little gift you're carrying in your pocket for them."

"Oh, the alloy," she chuckled. "That's what started all this and I nearly forgot about it. Did I tell you it could be used to increase the firepower of your X-wings?" He almost came to a halt in surprise as he carried her down the corridor. He stared at her and shook his head. "Well, it can. Not directly, you understand. It's all to do with heat absorption. If we replace the laser cannon tips with it, it should ... "

Listening, Makintay smiled. He wondered how many more improvements she would invent in all the years they would have together -- if the Force was with them.

Desperate Measures

The steady beeping of the vital signs monitors played counter-point to the rhythmic hiss of the respirator. Listening as he had done almost constantly for the past day and a half. Squadron Leader Stevan Makintay found the sounds both reassuring and irritating.

Rubbing at his aching eyes, he turned and looked down again at Ketrian Altrone's pale face. Wake up. Kel, please, he begged silently. Talk to me. Please don't die.

A strong, warm hand squeezed sympathetically at Makintay's shoulder, and he jumped, turned to see Eyrie Base Doctor Tarrek leaning over him.

"You really should go get some sleep, Mak, " Tarrek repeated "I'll let you know immediately if there's any change. "

Makintay shook his head. "I'm staying, " he said stubbornly. An upsurge of anger and grief set his jaw muscles twitching and he fought for control. "I got her into this mess. That Imperial mongrel, Pedrin, never would have had her poisoned if I hadn't... "

Tarrek sighed loudly, cutting him off. "That's not true and you know it. " He bent down to the still figure on the bed, peeled back Ketrian's eyelids and tested her pupil dilation response. "Imperial High Command had already figured the value of her new alloy and suspected she'd escape here to us with it. They'd have wanted her drugged and shipped to Coruscant whether or not you and the team had ever showed up. "

"Fine, " Makintay snapped. "But she wouldn't be lying here... " He refused to say "dying. " Tears stung his eyes and he wiped angrily at them as he finished, "like this. She'd be on Coruscant safe and sound. They'd have treated her for the security drug and she'd be enjoying her new-found celebrity status. If only I had let her be!"

"We, " Tarrek corrected calmly as he straightened up again. "It was an Alliance Command decision to contact her. "

"It was my idea, " Mak insisted. "Well?" he asked, leaning forward to peer at the datapad on which Tarrek was making another entry. "Did it work any better than the last one you tried?" He was referring to the ever-growing list of antidotes Tarrek had injected into Ketrian during the three days since her arrival at Eyrie Base sick bay.

Tarrek couldn't meet Makintay's desperate eyes. "No, " he admitted sadly. "She's still losing ground to the poison. " Frustrated, angered by his inability to help, he threw the datapad down on a nearby table. "I just can't understand it. She seemed to be fighting it off okay when we first treated her. "

"I've been doing some thinking about that, " Makintay said. His tone was so murderously chill that Tarrek turned and looked at him anxiously. "You don't know Pedrin; I do. Unfortunately. But you do know what he did to me when he interrogated me. "

Tarrek flinched, remembering the medical evidence - and what he'd heard when he'd placed Makintay in hypno-trance and tried via standard anti-trauma de-programming to help the man over the psychological effects of his torture. "Pedrin is a sadist, " he agreed.

"And then some. " Makintay squeezed Ketrian's limp hand, bent and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Her flesh seemed as smooth as wax and was beaded with sweat. You 're not going to die

Ket, he vowed silently. We're not going to let that Imperial slime-spawn win.

Makintay got to his feet. "Pedrin must have designed a special poison. He's smart enough. And evil enough. Ketrian told me he really hated the thought of her going to Coruscant and not him. I'll bet right now he's bragging to his high command about how he personally made sure she'd never survive to pass on her new technology to us. " Makintay's fist closed about the butt of his holstered blaster and his burning gaze held Tarrek's appalled eyes. "Well, he's not going to get away with it. I'm going back to Hargeeva and I swear I'll make him talk! You just make sure Ket goes on breathing until I get back with the right antidote. "

"But, Mak, " Tarrek protested, "you can't just... "

"Oh no? Watch me. " Makintay turned sharply to leave the small room and immediately bumped into a medic's assistant who was coming in, her hands holding a tray. She dropped it clattering to the floor. Mak picked it up and apologized, recognizing the slightly- stooped, brown-haired assistant as a fellow Hargeevan. She was one Mak's high lord father would have sneeringly referred to as a lowborn, a poor peasant from the squalid back streets of Arginall City. Mak preferred completely egalitarian terms - that differing attitude along with Mak's insistence on proposing marriage to lowborn Ketrian Altronel had inspired his father to disown him and dump him on a penal world.

Assistant Medic Astina Griek it seemed had been thoroughly cowed by High Lord Makintay. She kept her eyes lowered and all but curtsied as she refused the younger Makintay's apology. "Was me own fault, m'lord. "

"No, " Mak ground out irritably. Surely the woman knew how much he hated to be called "m'lord. " It was a running joke among Mak's pilots. "It was not your fault, Astina. We're not on Hargeeva anymore. We've been friends since we joined the Alliance. Please, drop the 'm'lord, ' okay? You've been working so hard taking care of Ketrian these past three days. You must be exhausted. "

Finally Griek looked up at him, her blue eyes not showing as much intimidation as her voice. She was much shorter than he, her twisted back making her more so. A legacy of her days in an Imperial labor camp. A few strands of long brown hair fell free of the neatly pinned buns at the nape of her neck as she leaned back a little to smile nervously at him. "You're so different to your father and the rest of 'em. " she said. "I keep forgettin'. And it's you must be exhausted. I got some sleep at least. " She turned and looked at Tarrek. "Did you convince him to go t'bed then, doctor?"

"No, " Tarrek said, eyeing Makintay in disapproval. "Now he says he's going back to Hargeeva to get the antidote. "

"What?" Griek stared.

"I'll rest when I get back and see Ketrian healed. "

Doctor and assistant medic could make no further comment, Makintay was out the door even as he spoke.

* * *

"What do you mean, no?" Makintay shouted in angry disbelief. Surely he couldn't have heard what he thought he'd heard from Eyrie's little beady-eyed rodent-faced intelligence officer.

Commander Biros Baran was fully human but his squint-eyed, snivelling expression and habit of hiding behind a littered desk in his back-tunnel office had most of the base personnel think of him otherwise. Unfortunately he was rodent-like in appearance and manner only - he had none of the usual keen intelligence of the rodent species. Makintay wondered if the man knew everyone on Eyrie referred to him as "Barren-Brain" Baran. And this was the officer Makintay had been forced to have approve his proposed return mission to Hargeeva? Eyrie Base commanding officer, Colonel Farland, also Makintay's good friend, would choose today to be off-world! Slag sector command (or calling the man away just when Makintay needed him most!

"You heard what I said, Makintay, " Baran said, adding insult by not looking up from the datapad on which he was encoding. "Your Proposed mission would gravely endanger this base. You almost brought the Imperials down on us during your last visit to Hargeeva. It was

only the lack of competence of your backwater Imperial interrogators that had them fail to break you and get the location. "

Makintay's jaw dropped in outrage. Pedrin had been a more than competent interrogator - as Makintay was sure Baran knew after reading the medical report Tarrek provided on Mak's combat status. Mak's fists clenched and he trembled from head to toe as he fought the urge to reach across the desk and strangle the petty bureaucrat. He hoped Colonel Farland was at this very minute laying down the law with sector command in regard to having Baran replaced. They'd lost too many good pilots because of Baran's inaccurate reading of incoming intelligence probe reports.

"Look... Commander, " Mak said as politely as possible. "I already explained how we could get around the security risk. I'm the only one who'll be going and if things go bad I'll make sure they never take me alive. " Mak's last experience of being held prisoner, waiting to be interrogated by the Imperials' expert inquisitors on Coruscant, had given him plenty of time to come up with various means of insuring he'd be incapable of talking.

"You are wasting my time with your grandiose schemes to make yourself a hero, Makintay. " Baran picked up another datacard from the stack and fed it into his computer. "As I have maintained from the very beginning, you are far too much emotionally involved. You should never have been permitted to return to Hargeeva in the first instance. Now Altronel is dying because of your bungling and you want to make it all better by getting yourself killed. Well, I won't have... "

Whatever else Baran might have said was lost to choking sounds as Makintay caught him up in a death grip, hauling him by the uniform collar up onto the desk.

"You snivelling little insect!" Makintay spat out, his face mere centimeters from Baran's goggle-eyed horror. "If you think I'm going to let Ketrian die just so you can play games with me you can think again! Enjoy your nap!"

Makintay could have drawn his blaster and stunned the man, but that was nowhere near as satisfying as the feel of his fist impacting with the soft flesh about Baran's prominent nose. The intelligence officer's eyes rolled up in his head and he took a second jolt as Makintay let him go and the force of the punch sent him crashing into the wall behind his desk.

Makintay hurried out into the underground corridor before the guards - who were also more loyal to Makintay than to Baran - could come to investigate the noise. He was sure they'd be in no great hurry to report their superior's well-deserved unconscious state. Mak should have more than enough time to fire up his X-wing and take off for Hargeeva. Hang in there. Ket. Help's on its way.

* * *

With Commander Farland off-base, there were no fighter missions planned. It was very early morning and the main hangar bay was unusually quiet, which suited Makintay's purpose. He strode briskly toward Green Squadron's allotted area. His X-wing was silhouetted against the rising sun beyond the open hangar mouth, its sleek metal body gleaming in the pale yellow light. Makintay came to a sudden halt, only now seeing the impossible flaw in his impulsive plan. He cursed soundlessly and swung about, eyeing the other ships clustered beyond the X-wing squadrons. "Got a problem there, wouldn't you say, Mak?" an amused voice drawled from nearby. Makintay jumped as a short stocky figure dressed in drab gray tech's uniform crawled out from beneath an X-wing access port "Slaggit, Merin!" Mak scowled. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Only a guilty man jumps out of his skin. What are you up to now, oh great and lofty leader?" Chief Tech Merinda Niemeh, a Sullustan, was impish by nature and she grinned at her joke as she stepped closer. Her wide, thick-lipped mouth seemed to split her face from one huge ear to the other. But the glint of mischief in her oversized dark eyes faded as she read her life-time friend's expression. "That scientist lady-friend of yours is no better then?"

Mak flinched and looked away, shaking his head. He didn't want to say just how bad it was.

Merinda reached up and squeezed Mak's arm. "It'll be okay. You and the team will be back with the antidote before you know it. " Merinda had stopped by sickbay several times and Mak had told her his contingency plan. She waved an arm toward the assembled X- wings. "I've been giving your squadron a final going over. They're all set to give you... "

"They won't be going, " Makintay said softly. "I just punched out Baran-Brain. "

Merinda blinked but recovered quickly. "Good for you. With Farland off-base I knew that idiot would get delusions of grandeur. He's been looking to clip your wings for a long time, Mak. He turned down the mission I take it?"

Makintay was still staring off into the shadows of the hangar bay. "I'm not going to let him kill Ketrian, Merin'. "

"I love it when the aristocracy talks mutiny!" Merinda snorted wryly. "I'm one step ahead of you, my Prince. Come this way. I have a little surprise for you. "

"Huh?" Makintay said distractedly, still lost to his scheming.

Merinda sighed and grabbed at his arm, tugging him forward. "Over on the far side of the bay. I've got a small freighter waiting for you. The one Red Team captured on Ongella, remember? Takes a two person crew. " Makintay stared. "Yeah, I know it was a wreck, she flashed another grin, "but not any more! The guys and I have been working on her in our - you should pardon the expression - free time. She's all fuelled and ready to go. New registration too. " Makintay had come to a halt now, his jaw hanging comically low. "Keep it moving, your Royalness. We are about to go AWOL. "

"We?" Makintay sounded dazed but he moved as instructed.

Merinda shook her head in mock exasperation. "It 's sad to see our mighty Prince reduced to monosyllables. Yes, 'we'. " She knew he'd argue fiercely against endangering her, so she kept talking. "It took you long enough to figure you'd stick out like a beacon in your nifty X-wing over Hargeeva. And just how far did you think you'd get wandering around an Imperial-garrisoned city in your Rebel officer's uniform?" She tut-tutted and tisked, all the while propelling him toward the freighter. "Lucky for you that you have a sneaky Sullustan buddy! I've got everything you need on board - including your R2 unit. We shall all hope that you will be thinking sharper after you've had a few hours sleep en route to Hargeeva. "

* * *

Imperial Major Niall Pedrin had never been noted for his cheerful disposition, but presently his administrators were all but drawing straws in hopes of avoiding their duty to tend him. He sat brooding in his office inside the high guarded walls surrounding Arginall City Refinery and garrison, disgraced by the last communique he'd received from his high command off-world.

Pedrin had always believed his talents were wasted on Hargeeva, a backwater planet useful only for its exotic mineral deposits and its genius metallurgist scientist Ketrian Altronel. Pedrin had hoped her discovery of a new heat-resistant alloy might also bring him favor. He'd further hoped that his capture of Alliance Commander Makintay would have earned him a promotion if he'd only succeeded in torturing the Rebel into revealing his base location.

But none of Pedrin's plans had borne fruit. He'd failed to break Makintay and the Rebel had been shipped out, along with Altronel to Coruscant. Now Pedrin had been informed that both valuable Imperial assets had been lost en route, their transport apparently attacked by pirates. In a fit of sheer pique, Pedrin's superior had decided to hold him responsible. Pedrin was to be demoted and shipped to an even more isolated backwater world than

Hargeeva. So much for all Pedrin's dreams of winning a posting back to his beloved AT-AT command.

And so he ensconced himself in his office, desperately trying to uncover a means of avoiding his ignominious fate. And finally, just as parsecs across the stars, Makintay and Merinda left Eyrie Base, Pedrin found a solution. He was certain the pirates had in fact been Rebels. Which meant Altronel was probably still suffering the effects of the Imperial security drug he'd made certain she'd received before leaving Hargeeva. What would the Rebels do with an ailing, much-valued scientist? They'd send someone to search Pedrin's files for the antidote.

Chuckling wickedly to himself, Pedrin called his aide and had him arrange a communication with high command. Pedrin would get that base location and win himself a combat posting - this time there were no flaws in his scheme, no way for the Rebel agent to avoid his trap. Pedrin chuckled again, making his aide flinch. He hoped they'd send Commander Stevan Makintay. This time Pedrin would cause his Rebel prisoner far worse than physical pain.

* * *

The tech's coveralls Merinda had provided for Makintay were more Wookiee-sized than human. He'd rolled up the cuffs of the sleeves but the pants legs kept falling about his heels and tripping him. As he stumbled yet again, and almost lost hold of the repulsorlift sled controls, a nearby Hargeevan stepped hurriedly out of the way, his hand covering his nose. The man crossed to the other side of the narrow Arginall City backstreet that wound about the industrial sector bordering the harbor-front.

"Have these coveralls ever had a wash?" Mak complained as he checked the straps keeping his R2 unit securely covered on the sled as he followed after his technician friend. "They smell like someone died in them. "

"Gripe, gripe, " she muttered, pausing to check the corner that gave admittance to an alleyway. "So I couldn't find any jewel- encrusted cloaks! You're mixing with the peasantry now, my Prince. "

"Will you please quit calling me that? Maybe I can get used to the smell - maybe - but you'll have some problems carrying me when I trip and break a leg! Something in my size would have been nice. "

"It's not my fault you look as tall as a mountain from down here, Besides, you need all that stumbling. Honestly, the way you usually walk with your nose stuck in the air anyone'd know right off you're one of the high and mighty. "

"I do not walk with... "

"Shh... "she cut him off as she halted by a doorway. "C'mon. This is the place. Get that repulsorsled in here. Your little droid friend's going to do some very fancy slicing. "

So far so good, Makintay thought, following her inside. The local populace, generally unaccustomed to the sight of repulsorlifts and non-humans, hadn't been too much unsettled, assuming the two figures in coveralls were strangers delivering some piece of technical equipment from off-world to Arginall's industrial center. And such was indeed the cover-story he and Merinda had devised during their journey here. Mak had done his best to dissuade his friend from accompanying him on what could be a suicide mission, but Merinda had said she would come alone if need be.

They had no trouble getting by various bored supervisors inside the communicator factory - Merinda was a genius at producing fake IDs and work orders. Makintay unloaded the droid in an empty sales office and watched as Merinda's deft hands expertly worked to check for the correct connector. Despite all his protesting, Mak could feel only intensely grateful and relieved she was here to help with things he'd have only been guessing at.

"C'mon, Brain-Barrel, " she waved at the droid who rolled forward, computer-coupler extended. "Do your stuff. "

This factory supplied the garrison with repairs and replacements for much of its high-tech equipment. The droid beeped and chattered to itself as it found its way past one security code after another. Makintay hoped for success - if they could tap into Pedrin's files and locate the poison formula here and now, they could be off-world again within the hour and Ketrian would be saved. Makintay dreaded the thought of endangering Merinda's life any further than he had already.

The little droid's cheerful beeping gradually altered to worried- sounding whines. Finally it (ell silent completely and removed its link to the computer.

"Well?" Makintay prompted impatiently from where he stood guard watching the outer offices. He turned about as he heard Merinda utter a foul curse.

"No go, " she said wearily. "Your little friend got by all the security codes fine, but... "

"No poison file?" Mak finished glumly.

"Fraid not, my Prince. There is some good news however-your charming former acquaintance. Major Niall Pedrin, has been demoted. He's being shipped out tomorrow on the same transport that's bringing in his replacement. " Dismayed by their failed slicing, Makintay merely shrugged. Merinda sighed. "Come on, we gotta get outa here before someone gets suspicious. "

When they were safely outside again. Merinda asked. "So what do we do now?"

"Not we, Merin. " Mak turned and gave her a warning glance as she drew breath to argue. "No more, I shouldn't even be allowing you to wait for me at the ship. "

"Okay, okay, " she muttered, but looked relieved he hadn't told her to takeoff without him. "I take it this means you're going to Plan B?" He nodded. She cursed. "I've been meaning to tell you something, your Regalness, but I didn't want to wound your delicate sensibilities. "

"Ha!" Mak snorted and smiled wryly, glad as always of his friend's ability to cheer him just when he needed it most. "That never stopped you before!"

"True, " she grinned but was deadly serious as she added. "Plan B is as loopy as a mynock's flight-path. It'll never work. "

Mak patted the top of her head - a gesture he knew she disliked as much as he did her calling him royal titles. "You just hate it because you're not part of it. "

"No, " she said softly, "I hate it because it could get you killed. "

He turned and held her gaze. "I could get killed every time I fly a fighter mission, Merin. " He winked. "Hey, at least I'd die a happy man. Plan B has some very nice fringe benefits. "

"Yeah. I suppose, " she agreed grudgingly. "When you catch this Pedrin creep will you be bringing him back to the ship?"

"Only if I can't get him to talk immediately. "

Merinda's dark eyes took on a feral gleam as she looked up at him again. "Well then, be sure to give him plenty of inducement and add a few from me!"

"My pleasure, " he responded in the same savage tone.

They continued on toward the docking bay area, and came to a halt at a major cross-street. "I'll see you later then, " Makintay said, his eyes keeping watch on the traffic flow. Most of the vehicles were out-moded ground cars. The Imperial military had the bulk of the available airspeeders in Arginall City. "I hope I can find a hire-car, or it'll be a long walk. "

Merinda squeezed his arm so that he looked clown at her. "Promise me you won't try to break into the garrison, Mak. " He made to shake his head and she squeezed harder. "Please! They'll have you arrested the moment some trooper recognizes you as their escaped number one important prisoner. "

Mak gently pried her fingers away from his wrist. "Take it easy, I know you're right. I shouldn't have to go anywhere near the garrison. I told you Ketrian gave me a lot of inside info on Pedrin's habits. If they're shipping him out of here tomorrow, he'll be sure to want to say good-bye to his lady-friend in town tonight. And... " he had up a finger to forestall her interruption, "Ket says Pedrin's amberrassed to admit he's human, so he never takes a guard with him."

"That was before you and... " she began. "... before the Alliance team and I caused some stir here, yeah. But Merin, they killed every one in that team and wiped out the underground cell we contacted. Pedrin's got no cause to believe there'd be more trouble. "

"I hope you're right, Mak. " Merinda said softly. "I'll expect you back at the ship tomorrow evening then. " He nodded and turned to go and she added, "May the Force be with you. "

* * *

It was Season-Turn on Hargeeva, rust-colored leaves were torn loose from skeletal branches whipped by the howling wind. The storm had rushed down on Arginall City just as the last light left the sky. Makintay hunkered down into his coveralls, the alleyway in which he hid doing little to shield him from the cold wind. It must be close to midnight now. Had Pedrin decided not to visit his lover after all?

A brilliant burst of light suddenly illuminated the alley and Makintay squinted in reflex, his hand going to the butt of the blaster hidden beneath his long coat. A loud rumble of thunder followed, then a torrential downpour of icy rain.

"Oh great, " Mak hurried across the narrow alley into the shelter of an overhanging safety exit ladder that gave access to Pedrin's lover's apartment. Muddied leaves rustled about Mak's boots and a scavenging rodent scuttled back into its hole. At the joint of wall and pavement there were several broken planks exposing wall-struts and a deeper darkness that must be a basement. This was far from a prestigious part of town. "Apartment" was too fancy a word for the squalid quarters surrounding the safety exit ladder two floors up.

Amid all the lightning flashes, Mak almost missed the lights of the airspeeder until they steadied and filled the outer street. Darkness returned as the engine was turned off and there was a hiss of hydraulics as the passenger door came open. Mak didn't need visual verification to know it was Pedrin who entered the building. Mak checked his chrono - he'd wait just long enough to catch Pedrin off guard.

Mak moved to watch the room above but had to hurry back into hiding as he heard footsteps approaching the alley-mouth. There was a gleam of white-armor as two stormtroopers appeared, one coming forward to check the safety exit ladder. Cursing silently, Mak released his hand-hold on the broken wall-planks and dropped down into the narrow basement opening by the rodent's nest. Tiny sharp fangs sunk into Mak's calf and one of the animals squealed and bolted up and out, almost tripping the stormtrooper who was peering up at the safety exit ladder.

The trooper kicked at it, and called disgustedly to his partner, "Vermin-infested stink-hole! There's no-one back here t'see nuthin'. C'mon, let's go. He wants privacy, he can have it!"

The troopers left and a while later the airspeeder lifted off and disappeared into the rain-dark sky. Makintay hoped Pedrin had told them not to return for him before dawn. Huddled in his dank- smelling hiding place. Mak waited, then cautiously began climbing the safety exit ladder.

He was only half-way there when he heard upraised, angry voices, one male the other female. Then came a sharp smacking sound, a scream, and a woman's curses mixed with her sobbing. Not enough Rebels for you to beat on these days, huh? Mak cursed, hurrying up the remaining steps.

At the grimy glass-paned window he paused, peered inside. A dull light shone from a small bedside lamp. Pedrin stood with his back to the window, his tunic-coat draped over a nearby chair. A woman dressed in a night-robe was sitting huddled on the floor before him. She looked up at the Imperial and Mak saw her face was bruised and streaked with tears, her eyes flashing pure hatred.

Pedrin lifted a threatening fist as he, too, noted that expression of defiance.

"No, please, " the woman begged, backing away on her hands and knees.

Makintay took his chance. Prying open the window, he scrambled inside, pulled his blaster and stunned Pedrin just as another lightning-bolt lit the room.

The woman's head turned to follow Pedrin's toppling form, then looked up again, eyes wide with horror as she gaped at the shadowy figure by the window. Her jaw dropped and she

clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle a scream. Mak holstered his blaster, and lifted a pleading hand. "Take it easy. I came for him. I'm not going to hurt you. Okay?"

She gulped then nodded. As Mak bent and slapped binders about Pedrin's wrists, the woman stumbled to her feet and retreated to sit on the bed. She trembled from head to toe but made no further sound, her nervous eyes watching Makintay's hands.

"Slaggit, " Mak muttered. "He'll be out at least an hour. So much for asking him any questions. "

"Q-questions?" the woman stuttered.

"Yeah, " Mak said, flicking her a glance then staring murderously back at the unconscious Imperial. "He poisoned a lady-friend of mine. "

The woman snorted bitterly and lifted a hand to examine the painful bruise on her cheek. "Sounds like his style. "

Mak turned to her, saw her pushing her long disarrayed hair back about her shoulders and securing it with some kind of clasp. Her left eye was already swelling shut and there were finger-sized welts across her cheek. "Are you okay?" he asked, taking a step closer. "Is there something I can do to help you?"

"You already did, " she said and nodded toward Pedrin. "Thanks. He wouldn't have stopped until I needed a doctor. "

"Tell me about it, " Mak said sourly. "I was his prisoner. "

"Oh. " There was a wealth of sympathy in that one small word.

Mak flashed her a wry smile. "Here, let me tend those bruises. Is that a washroom through there?"

As Makintay applied first aid, Thera Capens told her story - Pedrin had threatened her friends, forcing her to become his mistress. She fell quiet and began trembling again.

"Here, " Mak pulled a blanket about her. "It's over now. He won't ever hurt you again. "

"You're going to kill him?" she asked, still shivering.

Mak stared. He hadn't really considered that. Could he kill a defenseless man in cold blood, even someone like Pedrin? "I don't know, " he answered softly. "I meant, he's being transferred out. "

She shook her head, wincing over her bruises. "Not now, he won't be. They'll have to investigate all this first. "

Mak let out a sighing breath and collapsed to sit by Thera on the bed. "Of course. I hadn't thought. "

There was a long moment's silence and Thera asked, "You need him to tell you how to cure your friend, right?" Mak nodded. She patted his hand, the one that still held the cotton swab he'd used to clean her face. "You have a gentle touch, Rebel. How do you plan on making him talk?" Mak shrugged and she gave him a wry smile. "You're new at this, aren't you. Interrogating people, I mean. "

Mak snorted. "It's not something they taught at the Palace. "

Thera's good eye widened. "You're one of the King's men?"

"Ahh... well... sort of. Once. "

Thera sighed and looked back to Pedrin. "Threats won't work with him. It'll take a long time to break him, and you don't have time. His guards will be here by dawn. "

"I know, " Mak said heavily. "I was just hoping I'd get lucky. Now I have no choice, I'll have to take him someplace else to work on him. "

"You gotta get him outa here first. I don't recommend the front door, too many snoopers and spy-eyes. I can have a friend of mine bring a motor-sled round back if you can carry that creep down the safety exit ladder. "

"No problem, I was thinking I'd have to lug the mongrel all the way back to my ship. "

"You have a ship?" Thera stared at him hopefully. "Can you take me off-world? I don't want to be here when his thugs come round asking questions. "

Up until now Makintay hadn't stopped to consider what might happen to Pedrin's lover after the Imperial disappeared from her life. He certainly couldn't leave her for Imperial interrogation. "Right, " he said grimly. "Pack your things, and have that vehicle ready. How do you feel about joining the Rebel Alliance?"

By way of answer Thera threw her arms about him and hugged him delightedly.

When Major Nial Pedrin finally got his blurred vision back into focus, he definitely didn't like what he saw. On the other side of a small ship-board cabin, standing slouched insolently up against the bulkhead, and wearing Alliance uniform, was Commander Stevan Makintay.

"Enjoy your beauty sleep?" Makintay sneered, moving closer. "I'm afraid it didn't help, but there wasn't much to start with, now was there?"

Pedrin ignored the insult. He turned to check his surroundings and immediately regretted it. His head felt ready to split. Clothed only in his rain-damp uniform shirt and trousers, he was bound painfully tight to a chair before a small desk in an otherwise empty cabin. The deck and bulkheads reverberated with the unmistakable feel of hyperdrive engines at full throttle.

Momentary panic caused Pedrin's pulse to race. Hyperspace! The experts who had implanted the transponder micro-beacon in his arm had assured Pedrin they could follow it to the other side of the galaxy if need be. Pedrin had told them there had best not be a need or they would answer for it. He'd ordered them to capture the Rebels before they could leave Hargeeva. Panic became rage as Pedrin realized someone higher up had pulled rank to force his team to allow Makintay to leave Hargeeva with him. Obviously High Command had decided they could not rely on their inquisitors getting the information, so they'd opted to follow the Rebel ship all the way to its base. Easy enough for them, but that left Pedrin in Rebel hands for at least the next few hours.

Pedrin tried to find moisture enough in his dry mouth so as to speak. "You'll never get away with this, Makintay, " he began.

The Rebel commander cocked an eyebrow at him scornfully. "Oh really? You make too free with that word, 'never, ' Major. You also told me I'd never see Ketrian again, remember?"

"So she betrayed us after all, " Pedrin sneered. "That would surprise only my superiors. It is as well measures were taken to ensure she would be of no use to your pitiful Rebellion. "

"And I didn't think I'd enjoy hitting a bound man. " Makintay's green eyes glinted like ice in a snowbank. "But then you're no man, are you, scum!" He swung a powerful right fist and connected with the side of Pedrin's head. "Tell me what you used on her or you'll get a beating that'll make the one you gave me look easy!"

Pedrin sucked at the inside of his split cheek and swallowed blood. He hoped this ship wasn't far from its destination. Those fools in Intelligence would pay for getting him into

this! "And you Rebels pretend to have such pure ethics, " he taunted. "You see? Torture comes as easily to you as to us. "

Makintay flushed and turned away then said quietly, "You're wrong. " He swung back to face his prisoner. If his eyes had been icy before they were deadly cold now. "But you can be sure I'll do whatever is needed to keep Ketrian alive. You think you can with-stand my desperation, Pedrin? You know how much she means to me. Do you truly believe you can hold out against whatever her dying drives me to do to you? And she is dying, scum. Slowly, breath by breath, she's failing. She dies and you die too. But I guarantee your death won't come any faster or less painfully. I'll keep you alive a long time, Pedrin. My grief will know no bounds. "

Staring up into those death's-head eyes, Pedrin flinched. He swallowed hard and tried to tell himself help wasn't far off. It didn't work. "Look, Makintay, " he said nervously. "I don't want Ketrian to die. She's worth a lot to the Empire, and... "

Makintay leaned forward, grabbed at the front of Pedrin's under-shirt, pulled him closer and shouted, "Forget your cursed Empire!"

"Right, right, " Pedrin nodded, squirming frantically to free him-self. "I was only trying to say that it was their idea to poison Altrone. I told them it could go wrong. I warned them... "

Makintay let go, stepped back, his expression calmer. "What did they give her?"

"Just the standard drug, it's easily cured with a dose of Trypanid. "

"Liar!" Makintay roared. "I should kill you, you filthy coward. " He drew his blaster and flipped the stun setting to kill. "No more stalling. Tell me now or I blast you. " The weapon snout pointed at

Pedrin's heart. He gulped and paled. "And this time, be sure you get it right "

It took Pedrin several tries to find his voice. "I swear, that is the truth, " he pleaded. "Trypanid will fix her... "

Makintay's finger shook on the trigger and the blaster barrel wavered from side to side as he struggled for control. "Our doctor has already tried Trypanid, scum. We've known the formula for the standard Imperial security drug for months. That's not what you used on Ketrian. You get one more chance, then I start ventilating your body. "

Pedrin's eyes bulged and his jaw worked convulsively. He couldn't look away from that threatening blaster muzzle. "It's the truth, I tell you! There must be something else wrong with her!" Makintay's knuckles flashed white about the trigger. "Kill me and she'll die too!"

Makintay uttered a foul curse, turned his back, bolstered the blaster and hit the door release.

Pedrin caught a quick glimpse of a brightly lit outer corridor before the door slid closed again. He sagged against his bonds and tried to ignore the sweat streaming into his eyes. His heart was pounding so hard that it hurt his ribs. He'd told the truth. Why was Makintay refusing to accept it? Altronel must have caught some strange disease. Pedrin hoped fervently that the Rebel base was not far off. The moment the ship landed there the Sector Fleet would follow to demand the Rebels' surrender. Picturing what he'd do to Makintay shortly thereafter set Pedrin giggling as he waited.

* * *

"Well?" Merinda asked from the rec table in the middle of the common room. She and Thera had been playing a hologame. "We heard a lot of shouting. But you don't look happy."

"I'm not," Mak scowled. He poured himself a cup of water and swallowed it down. "You were right, Thera. I'm not much at this interrogation business. He's calling my bluff." Mak put down the cup and turned to them. "And I don't have the stomach to try anything worse on him than a few punches. Even for Ketrian." He swung an arm and knocked the cup to the deck. "Some friend!"

"She wouldn't want you as her friend if you were any different, Mak," Merinda said softly. "Does this mean we go to plan C?"

Mak nodded then waved off Merinda as she got to her feet. "No, stay there. I'll do it. I'm the one got us into this mess. I hope Colonel Farland is in a good mood. He should still be at Sector headquarters."

"Good thinking," Merinda said, "You wanna avoid home base, Baran's probably looking to have you shot on sight."

Mak sighed. "Something else to make my life interesting."

"What's this Plan C?" Thera watched Makintay disappear into the cockpit.

Merinda explained. "We call for help. Mak's going to transmit to headquarters and have them send an interrogation team out here to us. That way we don't endanger Rebel lives if anyone's tracking us."

"Tracking?" Thera started. "Can they do that?"

"Yeah, it's been done before. They plant a miniature transponder on a ship's hull. Sometimes they do it as matter of course on any freighter that docks on an Imperial-controlled world. But I don't think we have anything to worry about. I set up a vid-scan and I know no-one came near this ship while I was gone. "

They looked up as Makintay returned and slumped dejectedly into a seat opposite them.

"Cheer up, my Prince, " Merinda reached over and squeezed his arm. "The interrogation team will crack your prisoner in no time. "

"Prince?" Thera sat up straighter and peered suspiciously at Makintay. "You're not, you couldn't be, the Makintay?"

Merinda enjoyed the reaction as she said, "Yep, it's him, the one and only, Lord Stevan Makintay. "

It took a moment for Thera to find her voice. "Your father says you're dead. "

"To him, I am, " Mak said casually. He had other things on his mind. "I'm sure Pedrin's up to something. I thought he'd crack as soon as he saw who had him prisoner, but he wasn't even surprised to see me. He didn't so much as blink when I told him Ketrian's with the Alliance. He's so slaggin' smug about something. "

"He told me there was a big push to uncover Rebel information. " Thera put in. "He's desperate for a promotion back to AT-AT command. You're right, he probably is scheming something. "

"Oh great, " Makintay said glumly. "Any ideas?"

She shook her head, then looked up suddenly. "Wait! What was that you mentioned about tracking, Chief? How big are those things? What do they look like?" Merinda indicated. Thera jumped to her feet excitedly. "That's it then! Got to be!"

"What?" Makintay and Merinda demanded in unison.

"Last night, when Pedrin kissed me, I tried to push him away, " Thera explained, pausing significantly before she added, "And I felt a strange hard bump on his left arm. He yelped, and got mad because

I'd hurt him, must have hit a tender spot. I asked him what was wrong with his arm. He said he'd had surgery. Then he got this real nasty look in his eye and he said, "But it'll hurt the Rebels a lot more than it hurts me. "

Makintay and Merinda stared at one another. "A tracker!" Mak said, his face pale. "I should have guessed. We got off-world with him too easy. " He got to his feet. "Come on, Merin, and bring the medkit. Pedrin's about to have more surgery!"

Thera followed, but then suddenly blocked her companions as they were about to open the cell door. "Wait!" she urged eagerly, "I've got an idea. Maybe we won't need your interrogator friends after all. " Her lips pressed into a thin hard line. "And I can exact a little vengeance into the bargain. "

Makintay frowned at her. "The Alliance doesn't torture prisoners, Thera. Not even him. I'm not going to use this transponder removal as an excuse to... "

Thera went a little green at the thought. "No, no. " she assured. "Nothing like that. Just listen and follow my lead. "

Pedrin all but had heart failure when he saw Makintay return with a medkit in his hands. But that was nothing compared to his reaction when he discovered his safety net - not to mention any hopes of future promotion - were about to go out the airlock. He might never escape now! His only consolation had been the local anaesthetic Makintay had applied to his arm before cutting him. As soon as the transponder had been removed, Merinda dispatched it into the vacuum of space. Shortly thereafter she sent the ship into another hyperspace jump.

"Your friends will never know what happened to you, Pedal- Head, " Merinda announced as she returned to the common room and leered down at the Imperial officer tied spread-eagled across the rec table. Makintay was slapping some synthflesh over the wound in the man's upper left arm.

"He doesn't have any friends, " Thera put in maliciously.

Pedrin turned awkwardly to glare at her. So she'd been involved in his capture too. She'd pay for that! If only he could find a way out of this mess.

"So how did it feel to be on the sharp end of the knife for once?" Thera moved to stand over him. "If I'd been doing the cutting I wouldn't have used a local. "

Makintay unlocked the left manacle and the Imperial sat up though his right hand remained chained to the table's side. "I should have thought of that earlier. " Mak said, eyeing the woman thoughtfully. "You wanna cut on him, be my guest. There are plenty of places he'll

still feel it. " He handed the scalpel to Thera, who nodded her thanks and ran an appraising finger along the flat of the blade. "Maybe you better take him back into his cell first - I don't want blood all over the decks out here. "

"Fine by me, " Thera said coldly. "You drag him in there and tie him up and I'll be along in a moment. There's a few other things I want to try on him too. " She turned to Merinda. "Can I borrow your tool kit, Chief?"

"Sure. " the Sullustan nodded. "I'll go get it. "

"Move it along, " Makintay freed the chains from the table and Pedrin's hands went protectively to his stomach. "Back to your cell, scum, the lady wants to play catch-up. I saw the scars you left all over her. I'd reckon she'll be busy with you all the way back to base. " Makintay shook his head with mock regret. "And no one's gonna come rescue you no more. Such a shame. "

"Wait!" Pedrin pleaded, all self-control vanished in a melting tide of sheer panic. "She might kill me, and then you'll never get that cure for Altronel. "

"Oh, I'll be sure to keep you breathing, hero, " Thera spat. "I wouldn't want to deprive Makintay of his turn. "

"But, but... " Pedrin spluttered, his eyes rolling frantically as Makintay propelled him toward the cabin. "Altronel won't die if I give her the antidote in time. "

Makintay spun Pedrin round to face him. "What antidote? You said we'd already tried the only one. "

"I, I lied, " Pedrin stammered. "I thought the fleet would be here soon to free me. Now, well, maybe we can do a deal. "

"What kind of deal?"

"I cure Altronel and you guarantee my freedom. " Pedrin waited, growing more nervous as Makintay looked none too happy and Thera fidgeted with the scalpel. "Think of all those Rebel lives you can save with Altronel's new technology. What do you lose by letting me go? I don't know where we are. "

Makintay drew a deep breath. "You have a deal, " Pedrin sagged in relief and Mak lifted a threatening forefinger, "but we don't let you go until we're certain Ketrion's fully recovered. "

"Of course, " Pedrin's tried shakily to wipe away the sweat trick- ling down his brow and making a soggy mess of his normally perfectly groomed moustache.

"That means we'll have to take him to the base, " Merinda pointed out. Makintay frowned and before he could change his mind, Pedrin said, "I'll never see the nav coordinates or even the view from the cockpit. I could never identify your world. But I do have to go there - the antidote will need continual adjustment. It's a complicated poison. There will need to be frequent blood tests and... "

"You better know what you're talking about, " Mak interrupted. "If Ketrian dies, Thera gets to do trauma therapy with you as the stress release. "

Pedrin gulped hard, nodded and looked at the deck. He could hardly believe he'd won a second chance. He had no idea what was wrong with Altronel, but her friends had just given him the chance to redeem himself with his high command. He could play doctor for as long as it took to find his opening for escape - and a hostage who knew the base location. "Will your commanding officer agree to my release on these terms?" He kept his eyes lowered as if cowered, but needing to hide the cunning he knew they'd read from him.

Thera was staring aghast at her companions. Mak gave her a wink to assure her he had no intention of ever freeing Pedrin. Her bruised mouth formed a surprised and pleased "O" as she caught on.

"We won't be involving my commanding officer, " Mak said. He was already in enough trouble with Baran. "No one but we three will ever know you were on base. "

"I see, " Pedrin nodded. He flinched as Makintay's powerful fist clamped about his jaw, forcing him to meet the Rebel's eyes.

"I hope so, " Makintay glared. "You do exactly as we tell you down there or some trigger-happy Rebel is going to enjoy frying you a piece at a time. We recruit from Hargeeva, as you know. You keep your head down and your mouth shut or someone will recognize you and there'll be no deals from them. They remember the families you enslaved and murdered. "

Suddenly, Pedrin no longer needed to hide his true feelings. Makintay looked much happier as he read the genuine fear in his prisoner's eyes. Then he shoved Pedrin back into the cabin cell for the duration of the journey to Eyrie Base.

Makintay waited until it was late night on Eyrie Base before contacting the deck officer - one of his former pilots who'd been temporarily retired from combat service after being severely wounded in battle. Mak didn't like lying to the man, and found little consolation in Merinda's theory that it was only a half-lie. It was true enough that Makintay needed to keep his presence on base a secret until Colonel Farland returned to overthrow Baran-

Brain's reign of terror. The deck officer had laughed at that description and said he and his crew would be happy to help in any way possible. Mak explained there would be two newcomers with him, refugees from Hargeeva. They too should remain in hiding for a few days.

And so it was that Mak found himself with a disguised Pedrin in tow, standing before sickbay entrance. The deck officer had told him Ketrian was still alive but he knew no details. Mak hoped she had not deteriorated much further than the terrible comatose state he'd last seen.

"Remember, " he warned Pedrin quietly, "mind your manners in there. I'll have this aimed at you every second. You don't want another stun headache. " He prodded Pedrin in the back with the blaster barrel. The weapon was carefully concealed beneath the blanket Mak had thrown over his arm - he'd often brought one with him during past vigils at Ketrian's bedside. Built into the cliff-face above the sea, Eyrie Base was always damp and cold despite the struggling generator's attempts to provide heating.

Pedrin pushed against the door release and stepped into the much brighter light of the sickbay, Makintay following close behind.

Doctor Tarrek turned quickly away from his work, a grin lighting his tired face as he recognized the taller of the two visitors. "Mak!" he greeted. "Thank the stars you're back. She's hanging in there, but just barely. " He frowned as he noted Makintay wasn't smiling. "You did get it, didn't you?"

"More or less, " Makintay shoved Pedrin forward. "My prisoner here says he knows how to cure her. He should - he's the one poisoned her in the first place. "

Pedrin flinched as the doctor turned furiously accusing eyes on him. "It will take some time, " Pedrin said nervously. "To cure her, I mean. We must work as a team. I'll need you to interpret blood tests so I can determine what combination of the time-release substances are currently present and devise the correct antidote. "

"I've been taking blood tests every hour, " Tarrek said coldly. He was pleased to see Makintay had a blaster beneath the blanket he now put aside. "And I've been unable to find any effective counter- agent. The blood test readings never change. "

Pedrin swallowed against a dry throat. There was only one gun on him now, he'd never before been so lightly guarded. Makintay had sent Merinda on some errand. He must make a break for freedom soon. He moved close to Altrone's bedside, pretended to read the life-sign monitors. "The test readings never seem to change, " he corrected. "Your computers would not scan for the substances we have recently created. You will need to reprogram for

their chemical markers then take another blood test. May I use this datapad to list the entries?"

"The sooner the better, " Tarrek nodded. "If we're going to be running such sophisticated scans, we'll need more power than this simple machine can provide. I'll go borrow some data chips from Baran's fancy computer. I know exactly what I need. " He gave Makintay a worried look. "Do you need more guards?"

Mak shook his head. "Baran doesn't know I'm here, and I want to keep it that way. "

Tarrek's lips twitched. "I had to treat him for concussion. That must have been some punch. "

"Actually, " Mak grinned, "I think he hit his head on the wall. "

"Whatever, " Tarrek said cheerfully, "He had it coming. Good work, Mak. " He moved to the door, paused and said, "I'll be right back. If you're sure you can manage?"

"It's set for stun, " Mak lifted the blaster. "I've only got to squeeze the trigger. "

"Right. " Tarrek left and the doors whooshed closed behind him.

Makintay watched while Pedrin punched keys on the datapad. Still watching his prisoner, Mak edged closer to Ketrian. She looked as still and white as death and a thrill of fear went through him. "I'm here, Ket, " he said softly, touching her face with his free hand. "We're gonna make you well. "

From out in the corridor came the sound of clicking heels on duracrete and close behind the heavier footfalls of marching boots. A woman's voice complained, "I'm sure I don't need no guard just t'bring these supplies down to the doctor. "

"Any medical supplies are worth a fortune on the black market, assistant, " a trooper's deeper voice answered. "We've had medics attacked in the past. It never hurts to be careful. "

"Slaggit!" Mak cursed. "Sounds like a couple of Baran's Nervous Ninnies. " He looked about for a hiding place, spotted a free-standing privacy screen. "Get over there. " he waved Pedrin toward it and the Imperial hurried to obey. Mak had only just taken his place in the cramped but concealed space beside Pedrin when the door opened and Assistant Medic Griek and two security troopers entered.

"We'll wait for you here, Assistant Medic. " the senior of the guards said, and he and his partner took up a rigid at-attention stance by the door.

"I tell you all this worryin' is not needed, " Griek sounded almost at the limits of her patience. "But if you insist, then don't come no closer. Goodness only knows what germs you're trackin' in here on those filthy boots. "

Makintay almost dared not breathe as the assistant medic crossed to a shelf on the wall no more than a hand's span from his and Pedrin's hiding place. She stacked the supply packages, then took two or three steps to stand at Ketrian's bedside. Makintay watched as the woman bent down and placed her hand to Altronel's pale forehead, apparently testing for fever. Then Griek began fidgeting with the bedclothes.

Mak flinched as a loud beep sounded from one of the guard's comlinks. The guard called to Griek. "If you have those supplies safely stored, we've got to be going. Someone's trying to mess with Major Baran's computer. "

"Fine, " Griek said, sounding glad to be rid of them.

Mak bit back a groan as he realized the doctor was having problems getting hold of the needed equipment. Mak wished he'd hit Baran harder. He waited impatiently for Griek to leave, but she continued her fidgeting.

"We're all alone now, Ketrian, " Griek said and her leering tone made Makintay's flesh crawl. "How does that make you feel? I'm sure you can hear me, people often do when they're in coma. "

Baffled and not at all sure he liked what he was hearing, Makintay watched as Griek pulled some object from her pocket, her free hand pinching at the exposed flesh of Ketrian's arm.

"One more injection, " Griek continued. "That's all it would take and I'd have my vengeance for the husband and son you lost to me. Do you know how many people died because you brought those Imperial savages to Hargeeva, Ketrian? No, of course not, all you cared for was your precious work! Well, you're not the only clever one. I almost killed you and the doctor never found no trace of my poisons. "

Makintay drew a sharp breath and moved forward, but stopped again as Griek added, "But I can't kill you, can I? You're holdin' hostages just as Pedrin did. But mark my words, some day you will be brought to justice. " She lifted the object and Makintay saw it was a loaded hypo. "I have the cure here, I'll make you well, but only for the sake of the Rebel lives your work can help. When this war is over, you die. "

"You scheming traitor!" Makintay hissed, stepping clear of the screen. Griek jumped and dropped the hypo. "What's in that thing?" Makintay demanded, reflexively reaching for it.

As he bent down, searing pain exploded in his lower back. Gasping in agony, he clutched at himself, and suddenly nerveless fingers released their hold on the heavy blaster.

Pedrin released his hold on the scalpel he had driven into Makintay's back and snatched the blaster before it could fall to the floor. Then he stepped back as Makintay made a groggy grab for him. Behind the Rebel commander, Griek stood frozen in horror, her skeletally thin hands clasped to her mouth, and her wide blue eyes staring transfixed at the bright spray of blood spilling from Makintay's wounded back. Pedrin hoped savagely that he'd hit the kidney as he intended. By the look of all that blood he'd succeeded.

Makintay took another stumbling step then folded, groaning and barely conscious to the deck.

"Now, I have my hostages, " Pedrin announced calmly. He levelled the blaster at Griek. "Find some bandages. "

Griek blinked, then stared from the blaster barrel back to Makintay's bloodied hands which were ineffectually trying to stem the flow of blood. Assistant medic's instinct took over and she hurried to find some pressure bandaging then bent to tend the wounded man.

Pedrin sighed. "Not those kind of bandages. Something to tie him with. " Griek looked up in confusion. "Get away from him!" Pedrin ordered sharply.

"But, he... he could bleed to death, " she stammered, still on her knees. She pushed a pressure bandage into Mak's hands.

"Oh really?" Pedrin sneered down at her. "I take it he's not on your death list then, woman!" Impatiently, he reached out with his free hand and dragged her away from Makintay. She fell back and the only sounds in the suddenly still room were her sobbing breaths and Makintay's desperately muted groans mixed with the background beeping of the life-signs monitor.

"Who are you?" Griek managed to ask after a moment. Makintay had somehow managed to secure the pressure bandage and hold it to his side, the bleeding was not so heavy. Though she hated Ketrian with a passion. Griek had always liked the young Hargeevan prince who'd tried so hard to bring reforms for her people.

"I'm so disappointed you don't recognize me, " Pedrin answered somewhat distractedly, his glance flicking from his prisoners to the door and back. That doctor would be returning soon, and by the sound of it, would bring several guardsmen with him. "I realize these coveralls are hardly flattering, but still I'd have thought you know the man who rated such a vehement mention in your little speech for Altronel's benefit. "

"Pedrin, " Makintay gasped out.

Griek forgot her concerns for the Rebel prince beneath a rush of loathing. "You!" she hissed.

"Quite so, " Pedrin gave her a slight, mocking bow. "Stay back! This weapon is set for stun, but I could make an exception in your case. " His lip lifted in an ugly, curving sneer. "After all you are but a mere peasant and of little worth as a hostage - or anything else. "

Griek's fists bunched and her fair face flushed with rage. Pedrin flicked the stun setting to kill and aimed for her heart. She backed away, rage altering to terror. "Better. It would be a shame if I had to kill you, after all you were doing my work for me so well, poisoning our good scientist friend there. " The blaster barrel wavered toward Ketrian. "Or at least you were killing her until you changed your mind. And that is the cure?" He took a step toward the hypo still lying on the floor.

Makintay made a feeble grab for it and Pedrin kicked his hand aside.

"Still with us, commander?" Pedrin leered. "Good. I wouldn't want you to miss the last act in this little drama. All your efforts to save Miss Altronel were for naught, you see? One of your own kind was the murderer. " He glanced at the hypo. "Or would-be murderer."

"You... lied... about... everything, " Makintay tried woozily to glare up at the man.

Pedrin shook his head. "Not everything. When I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me. "

"Now what?" Mak asked.

"I need a ticket off this planet. Preferably one carrying the coordinates so the fleet can find its way back here. "

Mak snorted painfully. "No one's going to let you... "

"No?" Pedrin cocked his head as he heard footfalls in the outer corridor. "Perhaps you are right. But then if your friends won't bargain, at least I can make sure Altronel does die. " He lifted his boot and made to crush the hypo.

Makintay grabbed feebly at Pedrin's leg and the Imperial turned and kicked him in the ribs. Makintay fell heavily back against the wall, dazed and bleary-eyed, but Griek had reclaimed the hypo.

"Give that to me now, peasant, " Pedrin turned to her. She shook her head and backed away.

The door whooshed open and Doctor Tarrek entered. He was pushing a cart on which was balanced a spectrograph and a pile of datacards. Behind followed the same two troopers who'd been with Griek earlier. Further back, unnoticed because of her short stature, came Merinda.

"What in all the fires... ?" Tarrek began. He made to move to Makintay.

Merinda stepped forward, saw her wounded friend and made to draw her blaster and shoot Pedrin.

"Stay back or she dies!" Pedrin shouted. His hand shook as he waved the blaster roughly in the direction of Ketrian's head.

Griek, seeing the Imperial's distracted attention, dropped the hypo to the bed and made a grab for Pedrin's blaster. His fingers came down hard on the trigger and she took the full force of the blast in the chest. Her blue eyes widened in shock, then glazed over as she crumpled, a hole charred in the front of her white tunic.

Pedrin tried to recover in time to realign his aim on the newcomers, but Makintay lashed out, kicking him hard on the shin and upsetting his balance. It was all the opening Merinda needed. She fired and felled the Imperial with a stun shot. As Pedrin hit the deck, the tiny Sullustan checked her blaster and cursed.

"Slaggit! I thought I was set for kill. Well, I can fix that. " She altered her weapon's setting and moved toward the unconscious Imperial.

"Forget that... " Mak gasped. "Help... Ket. "

"Ketrian?" Merinda repeated in confusion. The guards moved to secure the prisoner and Merinda shook her head with mock regret. She looked across at Altronel and spotted the full hypo lying on the bed by Ketrian's bare arm. "This?" she said, picking it up and displaying it to Makintay.

"It's the cure, " Mak said. He tried to push the doctor away from him. "Fix her... first. "

Tarrek sighed but decided it would be easier to obey. Quickly he took the hypo, injected Altronel, and moved back to tend Makintay. "Happy now?" he said sourly. "You're bleeding all over my floor. "

"Sorry. " But there was a smile on Mak's face as he fainted.

"Would someone mind telling us what the slag's going on here?" one of the guards asked irritably.

"Don't look at me. " Merinda backed away. "I'm only a lowly technician. "

* * *

"Wake up, Mak. "

Someone was stroking Makintay's face with smooth, warm hands. It felt so good, he didn't really want to wake up. Then he recognized the voice that belonged to the hands.

"Ketrian?" he said with groggy hope. He forced his eyes open and tried to sit up but could only groan as pain flared in his wounded side.

Ketrian Altronel shook her head in exasperation and turned to the doctor, who was pushing Makintay back into the pillows of his sickbay bed. "Two days we've been waiting for him to wake up, then he wants to jump right out of bed. Typical. "

"Ketrian!" Mak exclaimed as finally his vision settled and he realized he wasn't dreaming. "You're awake! Are you okay?" He turned clumsily to eye the doctor. "She is okay, isn't she?"

"She's fine, " Tarrek admonished. "Now keep still. I don't think there's one drop more of your type blood in store on this base. "

Mak just stared at Ketrian who was grinning down at him, her green eyes alight with mischievous good humor and her cheeks flushed with the rosy glow of good health.

"I hear you saved my life, " Ketrian said, bending to kiss him.

"Well. I had help. " Her warm lips closed over his and as she drew back Mak added, "but not much help. I think I deserve another kiss. "

"Ahem, " Merinda cleared her throat and stepped closer. "Before you two go any further with the celebrations. I'd like to point out that you, my Prince, are in big trouble. "

"Baran's gonna court-martial me?" Makintay sounded not in the least unhappy. He reached up and took Ketrian's hand. She kissed his fingers.

"Oh. " Merinda said impishly, "I think he'd rather wait until you can stand up, then have you shot by firing squad. "

That got Mak's attention. He turned and stared at his friend.

Tarrek choked back a laugh. "She's kidding, Mak. " he said. "But it's probably just as well you were in my charge until Farland got back and changed the orders. "

"Then everything's okay again?" Mak asked.

"Not quite, " Ketrian said. "There's talk of demoting you and confining you to base for a while. "

"Oh, well, " Mak noted his condition, and declared, "looks like I won't be going anywhere for a while in any case. "

"You can count on that, " Tarrek said sternly.

"But, " Merinda held up one stubby finger and grinned from ear to ear, "Fear not, mighty Leader, Ketrian's already got them back-peddalling. "

"She has?" Mak smiled up at Ketrian, still revelling in seeing her restored to health.

"Oh indeed, " Tarrek put in. "There are those who would call it blackmail. "

"Blackmail, doctor?" Ketrian tried an innocent expression which failed miserably. "I only said I'd be happy to provide that new alloy for their X-wings just as long as Mak gets to lead them into battle. "

"You did?" Mak grinned.

"She did, " Merinda put in, "Word is Colonel Farland has succeeded in having Baran posted out to some obscure desk job on a safe world. " Mak looked set to cheer but Merinda continued, "and the new intelligence officer is very grateful to you for providing him with a high-ranking Imperial prisoner who knows all there is to know about AT-AT battle strategies and call signs. "

"Mission accomplished, " Mak sighed contentedly and settled back into the comfort of his bed.

Ewoks: The Ewoks And The Lost Children

Long ago on the green forest moon of Endor there was a heroic rescue and a friendship so strong and unexpected that the story of it must be told. Those involved were a family of Ewoks and a human family.

Humans of course are known to you, but Ewoks may not be. They are a race of small, furry creatures who stand upright. Among all the races in the universe, Ewoks are surely one of the kindest and most gentle. They know all the ancient magical arts and have quick, keen

minds. Ewoks live in family groups, parents and children together. Yet there is always room in an Ewok dwelling for strangers who are in need.

The Ewok family in this story is typical of the race. There was Deej, the father, a proud ex-warrior; and Shodu, the mother, fiercely protective and loving. Then there were the children themselves: Weechee and Widdle, the two older brothers; Wicket, the younger and perhaps smartest brother; and Winda, the baby and only female.



In DeeJ and Shodu's family, as in many human families, there was a rule that children must be home by nightfall. Dreaded creatures like the giant Gorax and his vicious pet, the borra, could lurk concealed in Endor's thick forests, and there were plants and pools and quicksand that could snap up an unsuspecting Ewok child without leaving a trace.

But at sunset on the night this story begins, Weechee and Widdle were missing. The lamps inside the twig-thatched hut had already been lit and small forest animals scampered into the circle of light for protection. It grew later and later but still Weechee and Widdle did not return. At last DeeJ launched the family hang glider from its catapult and took flight,





looking for his sons. Weechee and Widdle were bound to be somewhere nearby.

Deej spotted them finally, marooned on a cliffside where they had climbed to pick berries. But there was something else, too, something shining in the undergrowth upon the canyon floor. Deej threw his sons a vine so they

could swing down from the cliff. Then he landed the hang glider and approached the glittering metal object. It appeared to be the wreck of a spaceship, abandoned and left to rot.

Deej motioned Widdle to stand guard. He and Weechee would explore the ship. Inside the cabin their footsteps echoed, amplified



by silence. Food containers and animal carcasses were tossed in a pile, and the sleeping pods were rumpled as if someone was using them still.

Then DeeJ's sharp ears caught a small snuffling noise coming from a cabinet. Carefully he unlatched the door. There inside crouched a small, blonde human girl. She was crying and filthy and shaking with fever. DeeJ reached in and took her in his arms. After all, he was a father and she was a child, frightened and ill. The girl seemed to

realize she was safe; with a sigh she relaxed against him.

At that moment a loud explosion rocked the cabin, filling it with smoke and dust. When the air cleared, the Ewoks saw a dark-haired human boy of perhaps nine or ten, dressed in a torn spacesuit. The laser gun he carried was pointed directly at DeeJ. "Put her down!" he commanded.

"No, Mace, no—" cried the girl.

"Don't move, Cindel. These might be the guys who have Mom and Dad."

Suddenly Widdle burst into the cabin. In the confusion Deej and Weechee wrestled Mace to the floor and grabbed his gun. To deal with stubborn, blind violence the Ewoks believed in simple solutions. Accordingly, Weechee and Widdle tied Mace to a tree limb and car-

ried him upside down to their clearing. Deej followed more slowly, holding Cindel gently in his arms.

When they got to the hut, they untied Mace and settled the girl at a rough wooden table. Wicket brought her a bowl of soup.





"Thank you very much," Cindel said, smiling at him. "Can you talk? Do you know any words? Have you seen my mommy and daddy? They went away after the Star Cruiser crashed . . . I miss them so much."

Wicket gazed at her curiously, straining to understand. This human creature was nearly his size and he wanted to play with her. But just then she began to cough uncontrollably.

"Cindel, are you all right?" asked Mace in alarm. Then he spoke to all the Ewoks at once. "She's been coughing like that for days now. She needs some medicine or a doc-

tor or something. Do you have doctors? Do you even know what I'm saying?"

As if in answer Shodu gave the girl some liquid from a wooden cup. It seemed to help her, yet the next morning Cindel was glassy-eyed and more feverish than ever. In response to Mace's frantic urging, DeeJ and his two oldest sons left to get the sap that Shodu needed to make more medicine. At the last moment DeeJ beckoned to Mace to come along.

They walked single file beneath the huge, ancient trees of Endor. The woods were strange to the boy,



teeming with plants and small animals he had never seen before. Suddenly a movement in a hollow tree trunk caught his attention. There was a furry little creature inside with big, sad eyes. Impulsively Mace reached into the hole, but something gripped his hand like a vise and pulled his arm into the tree.

Deej and his sons came quickly to the rescue. They gathered around and began pounding on the tree trunk with sticks. The long

neck of a monstrous creature emerged from the tree, and the Ewoks pulled Mace's hand free of its jaws.

But the boy hardly acknowledged their kindness. He could think of one thing and one thing only: He had to get back his gun and find the Star Cruiser. His parents might return at any moment and he and Cindel had to be there waiting.

But after he and the Ewoks returned to the village, Mace began

to worry about Cindel. The medicine Shodu had made had cured his sister's cough, and now Cindel was acting as if she didn't need Mace at all—as if she would be happy to stay with these furry animals forever.

She was even playing their dumb games, throwing a hoop made of

twigs to Wicket and trying to teach him their language. *Sick*, *starcruzer*, and *crashed* were the only words Wicket could say, yet Cindel acted like he was some kind of genius. Well, Mace had had enough! Tonight they were going back to the Star Cruiser!

When the embers glowed low in



the fire pit and the hut was filled with the sounds of sleep, Mace crept across to DeeJ and Shodu's bed. His gun was there between the two of them. He pulled it away carefully. Then he woke Cindel and led her out of the hut.

The two children ran through the dark woods, stumbling blindly on roots, brushing leaves and cobwebs from their faces. Suddenly Cindel tripped and could go no farther. "We're lost, Mace! I know we are!" she cried.

It was true. Mace had no idea where they were, but he wasn't about to let Cindel know that. Perhaps if he built a fire, she would not be so frightened.

"Do you ever miss Mommy and Daddy?" Cindel asked when he had the fire going.

"Of course I do. I miss them a lot," said Mace, staring into the flames.

"It's been so long," Cindel said. And then more slowly, not looking at him, "I don't think they're alive."

"Don't say that!" Mace told her fiercely. "Maybe they just got lost. Or maybe they went to get help. But they'll come back, I know they will."

Just then a branch cracked in the forest and they heard a low, threatening growl.

"Hurry up, let's go," said Mace, kicking sand on the fire. But before they could move, a huge beast with blazing eyes lunged at them from the darkness. It was the dog mon-



ster who prowled by night, the one known as the borra.

Terrified, the children raced through the forest, but the beast continued to gain on them. Mace fired his laser gun wildly. Ahead was a hollow tree. He shoved Cindel inside, then climbed in behind her, accidentally dropping his gun.

All that night they stayed pressed against the back of the trunk in terror, just inches from the beast's swiping claws. But in the morning they felt the tree trunk splinter. Their only shelter was being destroyed!

The borra gave a series of fierce yelping cries. There were sounds of a terrible battle. Then suddenly, strangely, there was silence. As Mace looked out through the hollow, a small furry face appeared. It was Wicket. The Ewoks had come to their rescue again.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" shouted Cindel, hugging Wicket in the bright sunlight. The borra lay netted and speared nearby.

"Ah, we would have made it," Mace said, going over to look at the carcass. He noticed something familiar dangling from a collar around the beast's thick neck.





Among other strange charms, there was a small metallic object with four colored lights gaily shining. He and Cindel wore identical objects on their wrists. They were safety devices called life monitors, and as long as the four lights shone, it meant that all those in the family were alive.

Mace caught his breath in wonder. "That, that life monitor . . . it belongs to our family. My dad . . . he always wore it. Where does this

beast come from? That's where my parents are."

But DeeJ just stared at the life monitor, puzzled.

"What's the matter with him?" Mace said angrily to Cindel. "I thought you said they could talk."

But Cindel believed in her friends and had patience. "Our mommy and daddy are lost," she explained slowly to DeeJ and Wicket. "We miss them very much. Won't you help us find them?"



"Logray," said Deeja. "Logray."

Later that day the children learned that Logray was the village soothsayer. The Ewoks believed he had understanding of the past and knowledge of the future. He welcomed them to his hut as if they had been expected and beckoned them inside. Flames from a fire cast flickering shadows upon the icons and images on the walls. But strangest of all was a candlelit object like a magic lantern. The soothsayer gazed at it in a trance, twirled it, and the object began to spin faster and faster on his table.

Suddenly a powerful image appeared on the glass. Two people were inside a cage: a woman clasped the bars and a man stood

slumped behind her. Then without warning a third figure loomed above them. It was the monstrous Gorax, the most feared creature in all of Endor! As the woman in the glass screamed, Cindel began to scream too: "Mommy! Daddy! Where are they? Help them! Do something!"

Logray studied the girl for a moment. Then he waved his hand over the lantern. At once the image changed. Now it was a high and desolate fortress carved from desert rock.

"We must go there," said Mace urgently. "Where is it?"

Logray took a worn leather map from one of his shelves and unfurled it across the table. He

pointed to the place they had seen in the Image Spinner. It looked far away, almost unattainable.

Deej wanted to help the human children, but the danger was great. But when Cindel began to cry and DeeJ plunged his hunting knife

into the castle drawn on the map, the children knew they had won. "We . . . we go!" Wicket told Mace and Cindel jubilantly. It was his first sentence in the human language.

By the following afternoon all





preparations had been made for the journey. A large pulga horse, with a thatched hut strapped to his back, grazed patiently with two small supply ponies. As a battle horn blew, signaling their departure, Deej kissed Shodu in farewell.

Then Logray, the soothsayer, came to the travelers. He knelt and drew an eight-pointed cross in the dirt. While the Ewoks and the human children watched, he placed objects at each of the points: For Wicket there was a gnarled walking stick; for Weechee and Widdle, red and blue earwings to match the white ones Deej wore; for Cindel there was a candle; for Mace, a

rock. Two objects were left, an animal tooth and a beautifully carved staff crown.

"Who are those for?" Mace asked. He wanted the animal tooth, not some ugly old rock! In disgust he dropped the rock in the underbrush the first chance he had.

At last the caravan moved off through the tall trees of the mountain regions. The landscape gave way to the lush forests of a river valley and then to an eerie woods. As they moved uneasily through bent and gnarled trees, a heavy branch crashed down in front of them, narrowly missing Cindel.

Moments later a tall lumberjack

Ewok swaggered onto the path carrying an axe. He was called Chukha Trok and he wore an ornate breastplate and a jawbone necklace.

"Hey, you almost killed us!" yelled Mace angrily.

But Chukha just laughed at Mace and pinched the boy's nose.

"Mace—look!" said Cindel. As the two children watched, DeeJ pulled Logray's animal tooth from his pouch and fit it to Chukha's jawbone necklace where a piece was missing.

"That's his? You mean he's sup-

posed to come with us? You must be kidding!" said Mace.

At that Chukha stared at the boy and shook his head, handing the tooth back to DeeJ.

Mace stormed up to the lumberjack. "We don't need another hatchet man anyway," he said. Then, as if to demonstrate, the boy flung his own hatchet and hit a tree fungus dead center.

Nonchalantly Chukha hurled his own axe toward the tree, burying it in the handle of Mace's hatchet. Then he put his arm around Mace, squeezing him hard and pinching



his nose. It was clear that Chukha would be coming after all!

As the day dimmed into evening, DeeJ led them into a mountain garden where stones stood upright like sentinels. A simple shrine had been set up and an old Ewok priestess was meditating.

After greetings had been made, DeeJ spoke of their mission and took out the carved staff crown that Logray had given them. The priestess, who was called Kaink, set it upon her staff. It was a perfect fit. Then without warning she

handed the staff crown to Mace. At once it was transformed into an ugly, writhing lizard. Mace dropped the creature in horror as it shot its forked tongue out at him.

Kaink pointed at Mace and shook her head; she did not want to join them.

It was the second time along the journey that an Ewok had refused to come because of him, but Mace would never admit that it mattered. "Let's get out of here," he said harshly. "Who cares about the old priestess anyway?"

Then Cindel reached down and hesitantly picked up the lizard to return to Kaink. But as she carried it the creature changed—first into a soft white mouse and then into the staff crown again. The priestess smiled at her and fit the cap upon her staff. This time she left it there. Now all the objects on Logray's cross had been claimed. Their caravan numbered eight.

As they traveled, the terrain became rougher and the way harder. At last DeeJ called for a rest. Cindel was playing on the pulga horse, pretending that she was a princess in a tower. "Help, help!" she cried. "Save me, my prince!"

Not wanting to be left out of the fun, Wicket came rushing up, crouched over like a monster. But near the horse's tail he stepped on a stick that flew up with a loud crack. Frightened, the horse reared and bolted from the camp.

The hut on the pulga's back





rocked madly as the animal galloped through the woods. Inside Cindel screamed and hung on tightly. Widdle, Weechee, Mace, and Kaink all tried to catch the two supply ponies to go after her. But it was Chukha who swung up on his own horse and came to Cindel's rescue.

As the lumberjack and the girl emerged from the woods leading the pulga, Mace rushed up to them. "Mace, Mace, Chukha saved

me!" Cindel said, staring raptly into the lumberjack's face.

"Thanks," Mace told him grudgingly.

Chukha nodded. Then as usual he pinched Mace's nose.

The boy wandered off. He wanted to be alone. The truth was that the journey had been hard on him. He was always somehow causing trouble; and what was even worse, others were always coming to the rescue!



Mace walked to a crystal-clear pond and stared at his reflection in the water. Then he bent down and stretched a finger toward the finger that was mirrored there. At once he changed places with his own reflection. Mace, the real Mace, was trapped beneath the water's surface in a transparent, hollow place! He screamed and

screamed but no one heard him.

At last, as they were preparing to leave, Cindel walked over to the pond and saw her brother. "Hurry! Come quickly!" she shouted to the others. "We've got to help him!"

A vine and a stick were thrown into the water, but both disintegrated when they broke the surface. Then Wicket tried the

gnarled walking stick Logray had given him. It held firm and Mace was able to grab it. Together Wicket and Cindel pulled the gasping, terrified boy up onto the bank.

"Weird!" said Wicket, using one of his new words. He patted Mace on the head.

"He saved you, you know," Cindel said.

"There's a lot of weird stuff

around here," Mace told her, as if it were news. "I don't think it would be such a bad idea if we started listening to our little friends more."

But late that night he crept from his candlelit tent, ignoring all the Ewok warnings against travel in darkness. He had seen his mother's life monitor light fading. She could be in trouble. He had to go to her *now!*



The wind rustled the long grasses in the clearing; a pony whinnied close by. Then on the ground Mace saw a faint illumination. Curious, he poked it with his staff. Thousands of tiny brilliant creatures, like sparks from a bonfire, flew into the night. There was laughter, too, high-pitched pixie laughter.

All the Ewoks stumbled from their tents, protecting their eyes as the creatures, called wisties, swarmed around them. Then Cindel came out, holding the candle Logray had given her. They had already discovered that it never burned down, but now its flame seemed to hypnotize the wisties. In a great arc they dived into the flame and vanished.





"Sorry," Mace said. But the Ewoks did not listen or even glance at him.

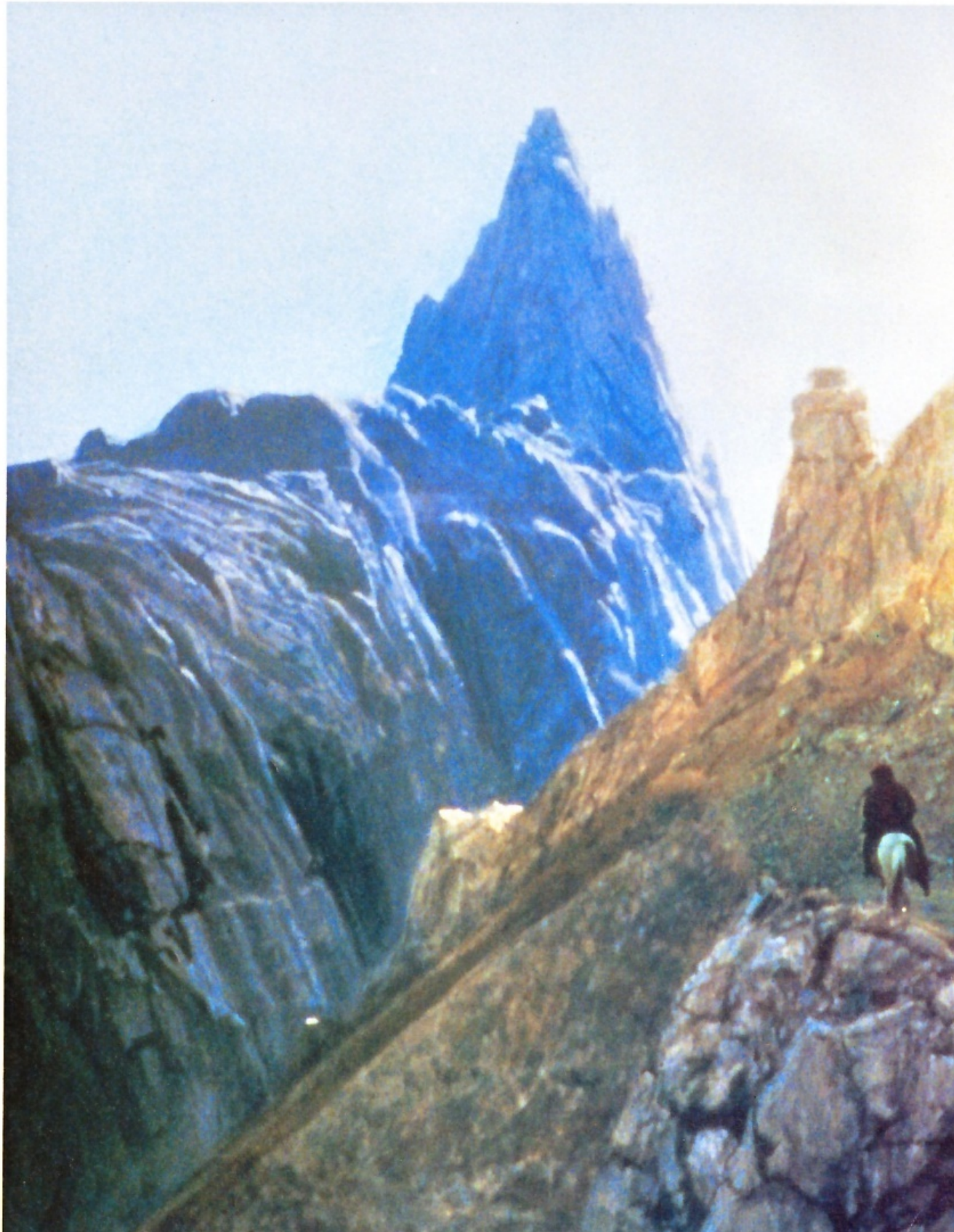
It was then that he discovered a lost wistie. At first he meant to crush it beneath his shoe, but something he could not have named stopped him. He cupped his hands around the tiny creature and showed it to Cindel and Wicket.

"Maybe she's gotten separated from her family," said the girl.

"Like us," Mace said. "All our families are split up—even Wicket's. His mom and baby sister 'way back there . . ." Then the generosity of what DeeJ and the others had done for them suddenly struck the boy full force. "They gave up a lot to help us . . . an awful lot," he said wonderingly.

From that time there was a difference in Mace. He spoke less often and watched the Ewoks to follow their lead. He especially

liked Chukha. The lumberjack was brave and laughing and more generous toward Mace than any of the others.



Two days later, when they had their first glimpse of the Gorax's castle, it was Chukha who put his arm around the boy to reassure

him. The castle rose at the end of a shadowed canyon, desolate, remote, and far more ominous than the image in Logray's lantern.





As they were searching for an opening in the sheer sandstone cliffs that blocked their way, Wicket handed Mace a rock of the same reddish color. It was the rock Logray had given Mace, the rock he had carelessly tossed away at the beginning of the journey. Perhaps now it would be a key to unlock the Gorax's castle.

Kaink hit the rock with surprising force and it broke in two, revealing a beautiful crystal surface with an odd-looking metal arrow-

head embedded in it.

When Mace put the arrowhead on the ground, it acted like a compass, wavering, then moving beneath a boulder to point a way into the cliffs. As the boy stepped closer, he could feel air pouring from a hairline crack in the boulder. Somehow he would have to widen it.

Mace signaled to Weechee. "Give me my gun. Come on, I can blast this thing open."

When Weechee looked to Deej

for approval, the father Ewok nodded. The boy was changing. Perhaps the time had come to trust him.

There was a bright path of light from Mace's gun and as they watched, the boulder slowly crumbled. They were standing at the entrance to a large cave. Inside a tunnel beckoned darkly.

Deej restrained Wicket and Cindel from going farther; they were to stay outside with Widdle, where it was safe. But the girl was overcome with terror. She had lost her mother and father. Was she now to lose her brother, too?

"Listen, Cindel," Mace said reassuringly, "I'll only be gone a little

while. And when I come back Mom and Dad will be with me. I promise."

He hurried to catch up with the others but the darkness inside the cave was overwhelming. The wistie! Of course, that was it! He'd named her Izrina and she'd been riding in his shirt pocket all along. As he took her out, a gauzy brightness beckoned to him. "Come on, everyone! Follow her," Mace called.

Izrina flickered and danced, leading the band into a huge, open chamber. But suddenly they all stopped short. The floor fell away entirely; the only way across was a delicate latticework net, like a ladder turned sideways.



One by one they moved out upon it. The net was strangely sticky yet it held their weight. Weechee and Kaink came last. "Watch out! Behind you!" yelled Mace. As they watched helplessly a monstrous spider came crawling up toward Weechee. The latticework was the

creature's net and now it was claiming its prey!

Then Kaink pointed her staff with its magical crown at the spider's face, tracing a pattern in the air. Hypnotized, the creature paused, giving Weechee and Kaink the time they needed to get away.





When they reached the other side, Chukha wielded his great axe and cut the web. The spider clung to the strands, plunging to its death, but the crevasse was so deep, they never even heard it hit bottom.

Mace shuddered. Their way out of the cave had been destroyed, but he could not even think about that now. His mother and father were waiting . . . and so was the Gorax.

The band went up another stone

staircase to a vast open doorway. As they stood clustered together, a shadow slowly passed over them. Mace stared with the others and felt the hairs along his arms prickle. Quickly he put Izrina into his pocket. The Gorax towered above them, gigantic, awesome, and terrifying. Mace and the Ewoks edged through the doorway and into the monster's chamber, hiding behind an axe.

The Gorax seemed to be preparing a meal. He lumbered to the fire and stirred a huge cauldron, then carried it to a table. Mace looked beyond the table's edge and nearly cried out. Directly in front of the monster was a crude wooden bird-cage and inside it, hunched over and fearful, were Catarine and Jeremitt Towani, his parents. "They must have been kidnapped by that . . . that . . . thing," Mace whispered to DeeJ in horror.

In his agitation the boy knocked against the axe handle and it fell to the ground with a crash. Slowly the Gorax hung the wooden cage on a hook. Then he turned toward them. Mace looked around frantically but there did not seem to be any escape route.

Suddenly Weechee dashed right into the center of the room, barking and dancing and leading the Gorax away. It gave Mace and Chukha just enough time to engi-





neer the Towanis' rescue. Holding a handful of vines, Mace vaulted up and landed on the edge of the cage.

It swung wildly and Jeremitt rushed over to see what was happening. "Mace, Mace! Catarine, it's Mace!" Then the three of them—mother, father, and child—wept and hugged and touched each other's faces with wonder.

"We missed you so," Catarine said, breaking away at last. "But Cindel . . . where's Cindel?"

"She's okay. She's outside," the

boy whispered. "Quick! There's no time! We've got to get out of here!" He fastened his vines to the edge of the cage and swung down, followed by Catarine and Jeremitt. They landed together in a pile under the Gorax's table and began to hug each other again. Nearby the Ewoks gazed at them curiously. "These are our friends," Mace told his parents with pride. And he opened his embrace to include them all.

But the giant had returned! He saw the cage swinging empty from

its hook. He saw the Towanis and the Ewoks hiding beneath his table. Then he roared in confusion and outrage and came at them with his claws outstretched. "Run! Run for your lives!" yelled Jeremitt.

Chukha was the last one to leave the chamber. To give the others more time, he charged the giant, hurling his axe. But it was a battle doomed from the beginning. The Gorax's flailing arms knocked rocks loose from the walls and they tumbled down around Chukha like giant hailstones. Now there was nowhere for him to turn.

"NOOO!" screamed Mace. He admired the Ewok lumberjack more than anyone he had ever met. He yearned for his strength and had learned much from his friendship. How could Chukha be defeated?

Suddenly Mace felt a burning in his pocket. It was Izrina. He released her and she flew away, dancing around the Gorax's face and into his eyes. Howling with pain, the beast abandoned the battle with Chukha and staggered down the stone stairway.

But it was too late for the brave



Ewok. He had been buried beneath a landslide. By the time Mace lifted his body free, it was already limp. "You can make it," the boy said desperately. "You're brave. You're strong . . ."

Weakly Chukha handed Mace his breastplate and axe. It was his last act.

"No! No! I don't want them!" Mace screamed. He collapsed on Chukha's body, crying until he





could cry no more. Then he picked up the breastplate and axe and ran down the stairway after the Gorax.

At the bottom DeeJ and Jeremitt Towani were waiting. They had strung a vine across the opening and tripped the Gorax, pulling him to the edge of the crevasse. As he teetered there, Catarine Towani aimed Mace's laser gun at him. There was only one shot left, a pale weak amber beam. But it found its mark and exploded in the Gorax's hide. Down over the edge he plummeted, disappearing without a trace.

Suddenly across the crevasse they heard a small voice calling. "Mommy! Daddy! Over here!" It was Cindel. She had grown worried and, with Wicket and Widdle, had followed the sound of their voices through the tunnels.

"We're coming, Cindel!" shouted Jeremitt, ecstatic at this first sight of his daughter. But before anyone could move, the Gorax slid one huge hand up over the crevasse and reached for Cindel. He was battered but not yet dead, and now he wanted the girl.

Acting on instinct and with a

speed he had not known he possessed, Mace swung out over the crevasse on a fragment of the dangling web. At the very arc of the swing, he hurled Chukha's hatchet at the Gorax. This was for all of them: for his parents kept prisoner like birds in a wooden cage, for Chukha who lay lifeless beneath stones, but most of all for himself. The hatchet caught in the beast's skull. He staggered and sank back into the crevasse forever.

Grabbing the last spider web fragments, everyone swung across

to the other side. "We thought you were dead," Cindel told her parents, her voice shaking.

"Yes," Mace put in, "we really did. I tried not to show it . . . for Cindel . . . but I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I tried to be brave and strong, but all I did was miss you." He buried his head against his father's shoulder, relieved finally just to be a child.

"We're both very proud of you, Mace," said Jeremitt, smiling tearfully at his wife. "You saved our lives."





The way back was long and hard, but the pleasure they all felt in being together made the journey a celebration. Only now and then, in the quiet time of evening, a look of

sadness passed between Mace and the Ewoks as they remembered Chukha and all he had sacrificed for them.

When at last the caravan re-

turned to DeeJ's clearing, Logray was there waiting with Shodu. He had been expecting them. Ceremoniously he presented the Ewok children and Mace and Cindel each with a pair of white earwings like DeeJ's.

Mace was proud of the honor that had been conferred upon him, yet far more meaningful to him were things he could neither touch nor name. Then for the first time in many days he thought of the Star Cruiser.

"When do you think we'll leave, Dad?" he asked.

"Maybe with DeeJ and Logray's help we can get our transmitter built after all," Jeremitt told him.

Mace realized that in a strange way it no longer mattered. Now that he had his parents back, Endor had come to seem like home and those who lived there like family.

Then suddenly Mace remembered the wistie. It was snowing lightly in the clearing when he went outside and took her from his pocket. "Well, Izrina," he said softly, "I guess this is it. I mean, you probably have a family somewhere too, huh? Well, thanks for everything. We really couldn't have done it without you. . . ."

Cindel and Wicket came up behind Mace as he let Izrina go. Quietly the three of them watched as more and more lights rose with her in a glittering dance toward the stars.



Ewoks: The Ring, The Witch, And The Crystal

Long ago, in a galaxy far away, a family of humans was traveling through deep space. They were on their way home, but they never got there, because their spaceship crashed on the tiny moon of Endor. They were rescued by furry little creatures called Ewoks, who lived deep in the Endor forest.

The Ewoks and the humans were from two very different worlds. At first they had trouble understanding one another. But they shared a kindness of heart and a spirit of good will that quickly made them the best of friends.

Then one day the giant Marauders attacked the Ewok village. All the humans were killed but one—the little girl, whose name was Cindel. Many brave Ewoks died defending their home, and the rest were taken prisoner. But one tiny Ewok, called Wicket, managed to escape with Cindel.

Cindel and Wicket found themselves in a strange part of the forest, not knowing where to go or what to do. But this they knew for sure: Whatever happened, they would face it together—hand in hand—as friends.

Cindel was crying. Her mother and father were gone. She had never felt so alone. Wicket wiped away her tears. He understood. “Wicket your family now,” he said.

Bonk! A nut dropped out of the sky and knocked Wicket right on the head! He spun around and raised his stick like a sword. But no one was there. *Bonk!* Another nut hit him on the head. Above him, somebody was laughing.

Wicket and Cindel looked up into the branches of the trees and saw a furry little creature with buck teeth. Wicket shook his stick.

“No—don’t hurt him!” cried Cindel. She held out her hand. “Maybe he can help us. Maybe he knows where we can find some food.” The creature laughed again and nodded yes. He zipped into the woods and Cindel and Wicket followed.

The creature led Wicket and Cindel to a little cottage carved into a gnarled tree trunk. He ran to the front door, then turned and chattered a welcome. Curious, they followed him inside.

There were cobwebs in the corners and clutter on the floor, so Cindel and Wicket tidied up. Then they found some dried mushrooms and made a delicious Ewok stew.

Suddenly the door banged open. An old man with a long white beard stomped into the room. “Teek!” he shouted at the little

creature, who was hiding under the table. "What's going on? I told you to keep strangers away. Instead you invite them in and give them supper!"

Cindel and Wicket should have been afraid. But somehow they knew that the man was really very kind. When they told him what had happened at the Ewok village, he invited them to stay.

"My name is Noa," he said. A giggle came from beneath the table. "And you have already met Teek!"

Early the next day Noa left the cottage all alone. Where was he going? Cindel, Wicket, and Teek wanted to know. They followed him deep into the woods. Then he seemed to disappear. But there, hidden beneath branches and vines, was . . .

"A Star Cruiser!" shouted Cindel. They ran inside and found Noa, making repairs on the ship.

"I don't know why I even bother to do this," he told them, sighing. "You see, it was in this Star Cruiser that I crashed to Endor many years ago. My power supply, a crystal oscillator, was shattered. I thought I could fix it but I can't. Without a new crystal oscillator, I can never hope to go home." Noa looked very sad.

Cindel reached up and held Noa's hand. She knew what it felt like to be far from home and all alone. So did Wicket. Now they must all be more than friends. Together they would be a family.

Not too far away, in a dark and crumbling castle, sat Terak, leader of the Marauders. In his hand he held a glowing object—a crystal oscillator. He had stolen it from the spaceship that had carried Cindel and her family to Endor.

But Terak knew nothing about spaceships. He thought the crystal was a magic gemstone that would give him great powers.

Charal the witch knelt at Terak's feet. "My spies have seen the human child in the woods," she said. "Perhaps she knows the secret to the crystal's magic."

"Of course!" cried Terak. "And once she shares the secret with me, I will be powerful enough to rule all of Endor. Hurry, Charal—find me the child!"

Charal rose and wrapped herself completely in her dark feathered robe. She turned the top of her magic ring and became a bird, a black raven! Squawking, she flew out of the castle window to look for Cindel.

The next morning Cindel awoke in Noa's cottage to a sound that sent chills up her back. It was a song, one that her mother used to sing, and it was coming from the forest on the morning wind.

Cindel sat up in bed. "Mama?" she whispered. Then she slipped out of bed and ran into the forest. Alone.

Cindel ran until she came to a quiet stream, where a lovely young woman sat singing as she washed her golden hair. At the woman's side was a beautiful white horse.

"Hello," the woman said, smiling. "I've been waiting for you."

"How do you know that song?" asked Cindel.

"I know many things," said the woman. "Come, hand me my robe and I will tell you everything."

Cindel did as she was told. The robe was soft and white, made of fine white feathers. But as the woman swung the robe around her shoulders, its feathers turned coarse and black. And the beautiful woman herself changed—into Charal the witch! She grabbed Cindel and climbed onto her horse.

Noa, Wicket, and Teek had been looking for Cindel. They reached the clearing just in time to see the white horse change into a wild black stallion and gallop off into the woods.

Soon Charal and Cindel stood before Terak in the Marauders' castle. The witch bowed deeply as she pushed Cindel toward Terak.

"So, little one," said Terak. "You've come to teach me the secret of the magic crystal."

Cindel was frightened, but she tried to act brave. "Wh-what have you done with my friends the Ewoks?"

"Why, they're my special guests," said Terak. "In my dungeon, that is."

"You'd better not hurt them!" cried Cindel.

Terak's face twisted into an evil grin. "Oh, I won't hurt them," he said. He gave her the glowing crystal. "Not if you show me how to make this work."

"But this crystal isn't magic!" said Cindel. "It's just a piece of junk—some kind of machine part."

Terak did not believe her. "If you do not show me the secret by dawn, you and your Ewok friends are doomed!" And he had her taken to the dungeon.

The hoofprints of Charal's horse led Noa, Wicket, and Teek to the Marauders' castle. When it was dark, they slipped inside the castle walls.

Down in the dungeon they found Cindel and the Ewoks in cells—guarded by two of the ugliest, meanest-looking Marauders they had ever seen. The guards sat at a table playing cards. Tied onto one guard's belt were the keys to the cells.

Only tiny Teek could scurry across the floor unnoticed and secretly untie the keys. Then he carefully pulled a card off the table and slipped it up one guard's sleeve. When the guard won the next game, he pounded the table in triumph—and the hidden card fell out.

"Why, you're a cheater!" cried the other guard.

"Nobody calls me that and gets away with it!" the first guard growled back.

Both guards drew their blasters and fired—and both collapsed on the floor.

Cindel and the Ewoks cheered as Noa, Wicket, and Teek rushed to unlock the cell doors.

Just as they were about to leave, Noa spotted the glowing crystal on the floor of Cindel's cell. "Why, that crystal . . ." he gasped.

"Humph!" said Cindel. "Terak thought that old thing was magic! And he said he'd hurt the Ewoks if I didn't show him how to work it!"

"It is magic to me—in a way," said Noa. "It's a crystal oscillator, like the one I need for my ship. If it works, I may be able to go home!"

Then they heard Marauder guards heading for the dungeon. "Hurry!" Noa cried to the Ewoks as he grabbed the crystal. And they escaped just in time.

"You fools!" Terak screamed at his guards. "How could you let them get away?" He turned to Charal the witch. "Go after them! Find them!" he cried.

Charal turned her magic ring and changed into a raven again. But this time Terak grabbed the bird by the leg and took her ring. "You may have the ring back," he said, "only when you find me the magic crystal."

Squawking, the raven flew off, with the Marauder army close behind.

Noa, Cindel, and the Ewoks fled to the Star Cruiser hidden in the woods and quickly prepared to defend themselves. Inside the ship Noa put the crystal oscillator into place. If he could only make it work in time, it would power the ship—and the ship's cannons as well!

Most of the Ewoks stayed outside. They were tiny creatures—especially compared with the giant Marauders—but they were wise in the ways of the woods. And this time they were ready. They would show those evil giants a good fight!

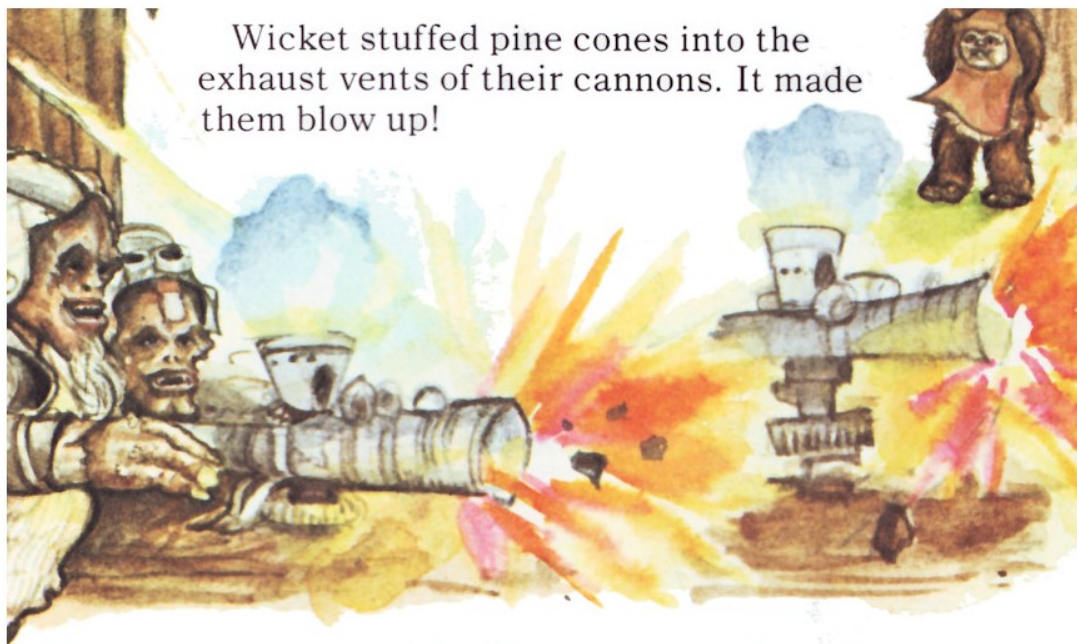
Before long a black raven flew into sight. And following her, riding slowly up the hill on huge dinosaurs, came the Marauders.

Then the battle began. The Marauders were big and strong—but the Ewoks were clever.

They popped out of hidden foxholes and shot the giants with bows and arrows.



They bombarded them with rocks.



Wicket stuffed pine cones into the exhaust vents of their cannons. It made them blow up!

Teek even gave one of the dinosaurs a hotfoot—and started a stampede!

Suddenly Cindel saw a Marauder grab Wicket. She raced from the safety of the Star Cruiser to save her friend.

When she reached the giant, she threw herself against his legs as hard as she could. The giant was so surprised, he dropped Wicket. Then, before the stunned giant could recover, the two friends ran as fast as they could back to the Star Cruiser.

But when Wicket ran inside and looked behind him, Cindel wasn't there!

Outside Terak was shouting: "I have the child!" He held Cindel up. "Give me the crystal and I won't harm her. Defy me and she is doomed!"

Noa was furious. He and Wicket went outside. "Let her go, Terak! If you kill her, you'll get nothing. Fight me for the crystal, and you have a chance of winning."

Terak paused for a moment, then released Cindel. She ran into Wicket's arms.

"I need this crystal to get home," Noa said. "So if you want it, you'll have to earn it."

The fight began. Terak was big, but Noa was strong. With his staff he was able to strike many good blows against the towering Marauder. But finally Terak chopped Noa's staff in two with his sword.

It looked as if Terak had won.

Wicket couldn't let his friend lose. He dug into his pouch and pulled out his sling. He swung it around and around above his head and then flung a rock at Terak. But his aim was low. Instead of hitting the giant between the eyes, the rock struck Charal's ring, which Terak wore around his neck. The ring shattered and pieces of the magic stone were driven into Terak's chest. He clutched at his heart. Then something strange happened.

Terak turned to stone!



Terrified, the giant Marauders fled into the woods. Charal the witch, still in her raven form, circled frantically overhead and then flew away, shrieking. Now that her magic ring had been shattered, she would remain a bird forever.

Cindel and Wicket hugged each other—and little Teek—with joy. Noa and the Ewoks shouted and cheered. They had defeated the giant Marauders! Happy once more, they could return home to their beloved village. Tonight they would celebrate their wonderful victory.

A few days later, with the crystal oscillator in place, Noa's Star Cruiser was as good as new. He and Cindel were ready to go home.

Sadly Cindel and Wicket hugged each other good-bye. "You're my very, very best friend," Cindel told him.

"Best friend . . ." said Wicket. He brushed away a tear with his paw.

"I'll come back soon to visit," said Cindel. "I will . . . I promise!"

Noa hugged his little friend Teek. "You'll be happier here than where we're going. I'll miss you."

Then Noa took Cindel by the hand. "It's time to go, Cindel." With a final salute to the Ewoks, he and Cindel climbed into the ship and closed the hatch.

As the sun set over Endor, Wicket and Teek raced to the top of a ridge that rose high above the forest. They arrived just in time to see Noa's ship streaking into the evening sky, and they waved a final good-bye.

Soon Cindel would be far away, heading home to a strange planet that Wicket had never seen. But the distance didn't matter. He knew they would be friends forever.



Velmor: Royalty and Rebellion

Part 1: A Diplomatic Report

The Imperial diplomat who composed this report sent it to her superiors the day before Prince Anod's coronation was to have firmly placed Velmor within the Empire's grasp. Fortunately for historians, the Imperial diplomat underestimated Velmorian intelligence-gathering abilities, and a copy of the report intercepted by Velmor's Royal Spymaster is preserved here for posterity.

Imperial Diplomatic Corps Planetary Assessment Log

Captain Zeta Traal Recording, Entry 411-C

Velmor is situated almost equidistantly between the Perlemian Trade Route and the Hydian Way in the Mid Rim. Nearby systems include Myrkr, Obroa-Skai, and Aquaris. Velmor is perhaps the least-exploited habitable world this close to the Core, though the population has seen a small increase in the last few years thanks to a trickling influx of Alderaanian survivors of the Rebel attack that destroyed that planet. If not for the destruction of Alderaan, Velmor might never have been rediscovered -- the planet has remained in relative isolation and obscurity since it was colonized thousands of years before.

Light in industrial development, the planet has fertile grasslands suitable for agrarian purposes, extensive untouched forests, and remarkably productive ore and gem mines. Despite the planet's copious timberlands, almost all structures have been fashioned from a naturally occurring duracrete analog called velmstone. Velmor also has a great deal of untouched wilderness teeming with game animals. If industrialization proves as unnecessary as I believe, the world could flood the Emperor's coffers with credits as a vacation destination for the galaxy's elites. **(See IDC Datafiles 444713D-444714G)**

The world was settled thousands of years ago by colony ships from the Empress Teta system. History shows that the Velmorian, Human descendants of these Tetan colonists, retained their love of royalty and the monarchical system. The planet's population is still centered around Den Velmor, the planet capital, though a few fishing villages, mining towns, and farm collectives dot the planet for kilometers around. Despite an independent streak, the people (and more importantly, the next King) will no doubt flock to the Emperor's banner, given the chance. I recommend against installation of a planetary governor -- the Velmorian show an almost fanatical loyalty to their monarch, and a puppet-king will serve better to carry that loyalty over to the Imperial Throne. And as you will see, the planet is worth much more to us alive than dead.

Twenty years earlier, the Rebel-leaning King Lorac and his wife were removed with extreme prejudice when Imperial agents incited a mob to attack and kill most of the royal family.

(See IDC Status Report Velm/731) Prince Anod survived as planned; the Lord Regent assured the IDC that Anod would serve the Empire faithfully. Unfortunately, the hired mob was unable to reach the crown prince, Denid, before a Velmoc aide managed to flee offworld with Denid and his betrothed. Obviously, their escape ended in failure, for neither Denid, the Velmoc aide, or his betrothed -- an Alderaanian -- have been seen since. The Regent ruled in the interim; Velmorian tradition required twenty years to pass before Denid was declared officially dead. With this declaration now issued, Anod will finally be crowned king.

Recommend my assignment be continued indefinitely, as I have gained the trust of the prince and Regent. Both are little more than provincial fools -- Anod especially so -- and I should have little trouble manipulating them to serve the Empire's needs.

A final note: Though nearly extinct, the Velmoc could prove to be a variable in the Velmor equation. This primitive insectoid trash was already dying out when settlers arrived, but a few tribes have clung on tenaciously in the Tol Velmoc mountains. Some Velmoc have wormed their way into proper Velmorian society, mostly as servants or freak-show entertainments. (The most highly trained domestic Velmoc in history was probably the royal aide who spirited Prince Denid to his doom.)

Once Anod's rule is secure, recommend orbital bombardment of the Tol Velmocs to eliminate this alien nuisance and serve as an example to the Human Velmorian.

Part 2: The Favorite Son

The assassination of good King Lorac and Queen Denira at the hands of an Empire-bought mob led to the escape of the first-born prince. This left no clear successor to the throne, and Lord Regent Zelor in charge of the planetary government. Both sides of the Galactic Civil War vied for the hearts and resources of our world, and nothing less than the future of Velmorian society was at stake.

As history shows, the power-hungry Regent hoped for a third option: the annihilation of Lorac's bloodline and a Velmor ruled by the House of Zelor. But first, he had to eliminate the sons of Lorac. The following record is a medical report from Royal Physician Wardle confirming that Denid, long thought dead, was in fact still alive -- and could claim his rightful throne. The archives indicate that Regent Zelor had Dr. Wardle and his entire staff secretly executed some time after this report was submitted.

Examination Record

Humbly Submitted to his Lordship, Regent Zelor

On this 18th day of Arloc, in the 310th Year of the Ycaqt

Prepared by Royal Physician Chozz Wardle

All praises be to the Lord Regent, whose wisdom guides Velmor in these troubled times.

As requested, I have performed extensive genetic testing on the visitor who claims to be our long-lost crown prince.

Multiple scans of bone structure, gene markers, muscle tissue, and epidermal composition determine that this man is a native Velmorian of royal blood, aged 35 years, two months, and 21 days. The patient's DNA matches exactly with the genetic scans taken at Denid's birth.

Addendum: As expected, I have been unable to determine the genetic identity of the Lady Loren, betrothed of Denid, due to her Alderaanian ancestry. Of course, with Denid's lineage proven, we can surely take him at his word.

Patient Profile

When the Great Revolt forced him into exile in the 313th year of the Mrid, Denid was merely 15 years old. It seems that Great Velma herself, perhaps acting through Denid's Velmoc aide, guided his survival -- Denid tells me the small escape craft had barely a week's supplies and a laughably inadequate hyperdrive. It crashed on a planet unknown to the crown prince, but epidermal data indicates that it probably was Tantajoc V, an uninhabited jungle world in the nearby Tantajo system, which has an unusual binary star. Denid has spent the last twenty years living in a harsh, dangerous, and humid environment.

I am happy to report that Denid is physically and mentally fit to assume the throne (he is even immune to the Velmoc flu, which he must have contracted and survived while living in exile). Psychiatric interviews indicate he has become a master huntsman and tracker; no doubt he will bring honor to the House of Lorac during the Great Hunt preceding his coronation.

I would like to add that despite his hard life these past twenty years, Prince Denid is truly a nobleman of the first degree: self-assured, well-spoken, and charismatic. I have no doubt that we are about to embark on an era of prosperity not seen since our Tetan ancestors first came to this world.

There can now be no doubt that our prince has returned. All praises be to Denid, Crown Prince of Velmor!

Part 3: An Elegant Weapon

Energy swords played an important part in the events leading up to Denid's ascension to the throne, and the royal archives hold a wealth of information on the subject. Through rarely

used in anything other than ceremonial duels today, armies of old once carried these weapons into glorious battle.

Though the archives are not clear -- and in fact, are often contradictory -- on the origin of the energy sword, Velmor's historians (and I myself) hold to the conventional wisdom that they were developed in the early colonial days from simple sabers and foils. Some records indicate that mining was both dangerous and difficult in the old days, and an alternative to the blaster weapon that used much less metal in its construction was needed. Over time, weaponsmiths artfully modified the basic swords by adding power to the blade in the form of charged plasma not unlike that used by a Jedi lightsaber, an energy blade that rewards study and finesse instead of mysterious Jedi Force techniques.

One of our world's most well-known traditions -- the ceremonial duel in which an outsider must participate before he is allowed to break bread with a Velmorian noble -- dates from these old days, when colonial life on the planet often forced intense competition for food and resources. Fortunately for offworlders, modern sensibilities mean that the duel is no longer to the death.

It bears mentioning that in the only recorded modern instance of a lightsaber-versus-energy-sword duel, the Jedi Luke Skywalker's lightsaber easily overcame (and in fact destroyed) the energy sword wielded by Lord Regent Zelor. Though deadly and beautiful, the energy sword is still no match for legendary Jedi sorcery.

Though of little historical value, the following passage from the autobiography of Lorac's Court Swordmaster explains the basics of energy swordsmanship, care, maintenance, and function.

An Introduction to the Energy Sword

Excerpted from the Memoirs of Lady Debor Fyalko, Court Swordmaster

To those unfortunate enough to be born anywhere but Velmor, the energy sword can appear to be nothing more than an anachronism in an age of blasters, disruptors, and anti-magnetic polarization rays. Yet this noble blade remains an important part of our heritage. Today, the energy sword is part of traditional duels, and, of course, decapitation by energy sword is the only legal method of capital punishment on our world.

The energy sword is simply a fine blade charged with focused plasma. Clashing energy swords repel each other, crackling with electricity and sparks. But how?

A specialized power cell in the hilt focuses plasma energy through a pair of highly polished and cut velmorite crystals (velmorite, of course, is as unique to Velmor as the energy sword). The blade magnetically focuses the energy along its 1.3 meter length. Only true Velmorian artisans can construct a well-balanced energy sword, another reason these beautiful foils are scarce today. Since control of the energy sword relies on finessing small

movements of the wrist and hand, perfect balance is a must for an energy swordsman, as important as practice duels and the study of technique.

Proper maintenance is important. Power cells must be recharged or replaced after 24 hours of total use, or half that if the sword is continually on. If the blade's color fluctuates, the crystals likely need to be refocused by a master weaponsmith or replaced entirely. And keep that blade clean! Everyone has heard the tale of poor King Bonod, the ruler of old who was killed when activating an energy sword that he had dropped in the mud.

Part 4: Hail to the King

Many accounts of King Denid's Coronation Day survive, of course, though none offer the complete picture as clearly as the following journal entry written by Prince Anod's personal bodyguard. Ergric Betos was witness to the tragic betrayals that left Anod and Zelor dead, Traal imprisoned, and the true identity of those who had returned the crown prince revealed.

King Denid was indeed merciful, and exiled the failed bodyguard to the Tol Velmoc mountains. Scouting reports recently returned to the Royal Surveyor tell of a "soft-skin warrior" who has become an honored member of the Velmoc-Dac tribe.

Journal of Ergric Betos

Arloc 24th, 310th Year of the Ycaqt

I have failed in my duty, and I expect to be executed soon. With this record, history will perhaps judge me more kindly.

My royal master's brother, Denid, has returned to us, and will soon be anointed King. Denid arrived on Velmor in the vessel of a bounty hunter called Korl Marcus, a scarlet-haired young man with a steely glint in his one good eye. Marcus had found not only Denid, but also the prince's betrothed, the Alderaanian Lady Loren, and even the Velmoc aide who had helped Denid escape assassination so many years ago. The Velmoc, Jedidiah, supposedly had once been offered training as a Jedi, but had refused, sensing the royal family was in trouble. According to Denid, Jedidiah sustained head injuries while in exile that left him little more than a rambling lunatic. Despite what the Imperials say, I know the Velmoc as a proud, intelligent race of warriors. The news that Jedidiah had been reduced to this state was disheartening indeed.

The Regent came to me this morning and informed me that Denid wanted only his guests to join him in the traditional Royal Hunt. I naturally objected; allowing Anod to leave without my protection was against my oath. Zelor was persistent, however, and when Anod arrived and also insisted I stay behind, I could only say yes.

Soon after the hunting horns sounded, I convinced the Royal Stablemaster, an old friend, to loan me a ycaqt. I set out into the misty woodlands of the Royal Hunting Grounds in search of Anod, despite my orders. Duty and conscience compelled me.

I caught sight of the hunting party where they'd stopped to rest in a secluded glen. While still too far away to be of any good, I saw Prince Denid and the Lady Loren shot by Anod himself, at Zelor's behest! The shot spooked my ycaqt, which threw me and fled into the woods. As I lay there stunned, I saw the "bounty hunter Korl Marcus" reveal himself as an imposter. He attacked Anod with what could only have been a Jedi lightsaber, and accused my master of killing someone named "Leia." But "Marcus" did not kill my master; he only destroyed the prince's blaster.

'Twas Captain Traal who slew Anod.

So focused was I on "Marcus," I didn't see the danger until too late. As soon as "Marcus" disarmed Anod, Zelor turned on them both and opened fire. Captain Traal fired in return, declaring that "Marcus" was a Rebel named "Skywalker" worth more to her alive than dead. Her shot found Anod, who dropped to the ground, a smoldering hole in his noble chest. The other three fled into the dark woods.

Though my first thought was to follow Traal and avenge my master, both she and Zelor eluded me. I more easily tracked the bounty hunter, who left a trail like a pregnant bantha. He had incited this event; I believed it was fitting he would be the first to pay. He seemed to be engaged in some sort of Jedi sorcerer's ritual. One shot, and he would be finished.

Then I noticed that Skywalker was not alone. Both Zelor and Traal had circled around and now approached the Rebel. Neither seemed to see the other. Skywalker must not truly be to blame -- after all, it was the Imperial who killed Anod.

Zelor made the first move. He crept up on Skywalker and ignited his energy sword, meaning to run the Rebel through. With speed I have never seen, Skywalker blocked the blow with his lightsaber and destroyed Zelor's weapon. But Traal was pointing a blaster at the Rebel, who had not yet seen her. I drew a bead on Traal, than I was once again knocked off my feet by a ycaqt. This one was ridden by a Velmoc -- in fact, the very Velmoc aide who had returned with Prince Denid! The mad creature leapt from his mount and tackled Traal before she could shoot Skywalker, but the cost was dear. As the two hit the ground, a shot rang out. Traal was pinned and soon would be in royal custody, but Jedidiah was dead. How the lunatic knew he was needed is a mystery to me.

Zelor attempted to take advantage of Skywalker's shock, but the Jedi -- for he had to be a Jedi -- was not tricked, and struck Zelor down on the spot. To my dismay, he did not kill Traal, but knocked her unconscious.

I could do no more good there, so I fled. I strove to protect Anod, and the interests of

House Lorac, to the best of my ability. I am grieved at the loss of my master, but there is one respite from the pain -- before I fled, I saw Prince Denid and Lady Loren (Lady Leia?) arrive at the scene. Apparently, my master had set his weapon on stun. I have hope that Anod stunned them intentionally in an attempt to foil Zelor's scheme, but I fear in my heart that my master may, in the end, have been as treacherous as the Regent he so admired.

I can hear from the trumpets and shouts of joy coming from Den Velmor that Denid's coronation is complete. The House of Lorac has been restored to the throne, and no doubt my world will soon join the growing Alliance against the Empire, despite all odds.

I must now return to face my punishment. Perhaps King Denid will be merciful.

Aargau: For All Your Banking Needs

Aargau: For All Your Banking Needs

Part 1: Three Simple Laws

Compiled by Cory J. Herndon

Long a bastion of neutrality during the Empire's conflict with the upstart Rebel Alliance, the spectacular wealth and well-trained security forces of the banking center Aargau provided ostensibly demilitarized ground. Here, both sides could engage in the business of war without risk of attack. At least, that's how it was supposed to work, and at one time it did. But like the Republic itself, Aargau fell prey to the sickness of corruption that eventually resulted in the Clone Wars and Palpatine's ascension.

Though possessed of a long, prosperous, and noble history, Aargau at the height of the Empire's power had its share of womp rats creeping amongst the banthas. Average Aargauuns now looked the other way at misdemeanor crimes -- that is, anything not covered by the Three Statutes. Not long after escaping Darth Vader's grasp in Cloud City, Princess Leia Organa boldly faced him on Aargau to ensure a much-needed loan for the Alliance. She learned the hard way that such "misdemeanors" included unarmed homicide between off-worlders.

Operation Third Law: Mission Debriefing Transcript 3, Excerpt 19

Subject: Protocol droid designated C-3PO



Property of Alliance Intelligence

C-3PO: As a first-time visitor to Aargau, I naturally wanted to learn more about this magnificent place, which was a fascinating and beautiful achievement of luxury, opulence, and technological achievement. And the droids! So many rare, expensive models I'd never had the opportunity to meet before. Why, did you know they welcomed us with a recording unit that I happen to know can translate over four million forms of communication? A droid with such a pedigree, performing tasks more suited to an R2 unit! No offense, Artoo.

R2-D2: [BINARY]

C-3PO: Of course, I didn't mean you. But thank the maker I had an oil bath and a good molecular polish before exiting our vessel. What? I needed one? Why you little --

[BINARY EXCHANGE DELETED]

Intelligence Agent Syril: If we could --

C-3PO: Certainly, sir. I must admit -- in the interest of accuracy for your records, sir -- that this mission may not have been a success without my contributions, in fact. Oh, did I mention the Garden of Butterflies in the capitol? New Escrow? I once belonged to an expert in butterflies, and the Aargauuns have assembled the most remarkable collection!

Intelligence Agent Syril: Yes. You mentioned the butterflies.

C-3PO: And the architecture of the roads, the overpasses, the highways, of all things? The architecture in the capitol? New Escrow.

Agent Syril: I know the capitol is called New Escrow. Yes, you said the architecture . . . let me see . . . "These magnificent roadways allow New Escrow to eschew the utilitarian tangle of aircar traffic that makes so many other metropolitan planets so frightfully dangerous," and "the wealth of the planet and its citizens, which I believe comes not only from banking and finance, but also vast, untouched reserves of the most precious metals in the galaxy, is evident everywhere." You went on to describe your experience as a "welcome respite from the drab confines of these dreadful starships" and thanked your maker for "a break from the unwashed, uncouth enlisted troops that are packed into the bloody spacegoing deathtraps like . . ." Okay, you know what? I'm not going to keep reading this stuff back to you. We're running three hours long as it is.

C-3PO: Of course, sir. Where was I? Oh yes. The customs station was positively swimming with off-world visitors from a thousand planets, and the constant and reassuring presence of the Bank of Aargau's security forces. It was here that I learned about the Statutes of Aargau, the only three laws on the planet. Shall I recite them?

Agent Syril: Why not?

C-3PO: Wonderful! The signpost at customs read as follows:

ON AARGAU, THESE CRIMES ARE PUNISHABLE BY IMMEDIATE EXECUTION:

1. The unlawful removal of precious metals.
2. The unlawful possession of weapons by noncitizens. (Conversely, it is unlawful for citizens to be unarmed.)
3. Willfully conspiring to defraud, discredit, or deceive the Bank of Aargau.

(Continued in file O3L-E20)

Compiled by Cory J. Herndon

The Bank of Aargau -- the central financial institution and planetwide governing corporation serving citizens of that wealthy and well-armed neutral world -- personally hires, trains, and maintains the largest private army known to exist during the Emperor's reign. Bank of Aargau Security, Ltd., a wholly owned subsidiary of the Bank of Aargau, runs every aspect of planetary defense, from customs to military actions to personal protection for the wealthiest citizens.

Visiting dignitaries almost always receive a front-row seat for the frequent war games played around the capitol. The demonstrations serve to keep security forces in top fighting condition and provide shrewd tactical public relations on the part of BAS. Many Aargauuns believed this military might kept their neutrality secure, but the simple truth was that too many Imperials -- including at least one Dark Lord of the Sith -- maintained vast numbered accounts there. Seizing the world to exploit its resources would be impractical and enormously unpopular both within the Empire and without.

BAS serves one purpose above all others: to enforce the Statutes of Aargau. And while all divisions do their best to ensure that those who violate the sacred laws receive swift, deadly punishment, the men and women of BAS Customs deal most often with attempts to skirt the first and second laws.

Sergeant-at-Arms' Daily Log

Record Number 31489384923889348.87.43993.4.20399.3.422/b/f.K.55

Sgt. Rolex Recording

May the Sacred Balance Look with Favor on the Honored Depositors.

Hour 1: Arrived at work 10 minutes early, as usual, to ensure smooth transition of labor at Checkpoint LH48. Processed 8 visitors -- Twi'lek nobles from Coruscant. 8 diplomatic pouches declared. Slow morning.

Hour 2: The new security officer assigned to replace Captain Ryyts has arrived, 1 hour behind schedule. Captain Smalyun apologized profusely and assured both myself and the right-shift officer-on-duty that his alarm failed, and he requested the incident not be includ-

ed in the official record. Processed 32 visitors (including 4 droids). 28 diplomatic pouches declared.

Hour 3: Captain Smalyun has requested a demonstration of the customs holoscanner. He reports that the newest model has not been covered by his training, and he wants to know "what's different." I informed him that the newest model had improved imaging detail, simplified controls, and a caf dispenser. He didn't get it. He insists on an operation demonstration, which I have offered to give after the mid-day meal period. Processed 40 visitors (including 12 droids), 28 diplomatic pouches declared.

Hour 4: Mid-day meal period. Chef served a delightful grik bisque, followed by a salad of Alderaanian greens topped with crushed pulta nuts and a spicy Corellian vinaigrette. Today's entrée was fish.

Hour 5: I may have underestimated this new recruit. He's obviously fresh out of officer's training, but Captain Smalyun has mastered the customs holoscanner in record time. Another credit to BAS training, thank the balance. Processed 27 visitors, 27 diplomatic pouches declared.

May the Sacred Balance Look with Favor on the Honored Depositors.

Compiled by Cory J. Herndon

Sergeant-at-Arms' Hourly Incident Log

Incident Number: 384

Report Number 9878740384.879945.54981.050028.22659716/G/i/48

Sgt. Rolex Recording

May the Sacred Balance Look with Favor on the Honored Depositors.

During the sixth hour of my shift we had an incident involving a smuggler that had to be one of Li-Suun Niik's boys. Only Niik would be crazy enough and cruel enough -- not to mention clever enough -- to pull a stunt like this. It was an honor to once again protect the Balance from his depraved practices.

The suspect passed through outgoing customs just as I was explaining the sacred Statutes to Leia Organa and her companion, the Viscount Tardi. Though I had not met the Princess of Alderaan before, the viscount is, of course, a well-known off-world financier with, I must admit, a better understanding of the ceremonies and protocols of our world than some citizens I know. It may please the Depositors to know that the princess and the viscount were visibly impressed by what happened next.



Captain Smalyun had taken over operation of the holoscanner. As outgoing traffic was light at the time, I felt he could use the experience, and the new officer seemed to be performing adequately. It baffles me that he missed the contraband, but I must assume this was due to his inexperience with the device. Fortunately, I caught the glint of metal on the holoscanner screen from my post at incoming inspections and pointed out what Smalyun had missed. The current scan subject had Aargauun gold bonded to two of his ribs!

Once the alarm was raised, the incident was soon over. Smalyun, no doubt chastened by his earlier error, immediately opened fire on the smuggler, and the rest of Checkpoint LH48's security personnel followed suit.

I would be remiss if I did not inform the Depositors that despite our success this hour, I suspect Niik's smugglers have begun to operate with more frequency. Worse, they may have connections within the citizenry, perhaps even within BAS.

Compiled by Cory J. Herndon

Bank of Aargau vs. Vader

Bank of Aargau vs. Organa

Customs Field Investigator Sergeant Rolex Testimony Transcript

May the Sacred Balance Look with Favor on the Honored Depositors.

My recent investigation into the incidents coinciding with the recent visit to Aargau of two prominent leaders on opposite sides of the Rebellion conflict has yielded a number of intriguing clues. I believe I have pieced together the series of events that led to the shocking discoveries made at New Escrow's Old Spaceport facility, which as you know was recently converted into a history museum. Perhaps most surprisingly, my investigation indicates no connection between these incidents and Li-Suun Niik's criminal gang, though I hope some promising data fragments may soon prove that Niik had some connection. Here are the basics as far as I've been able to ascertain.

Princess Leia Organa, an acknowledged leader of the Rebels and a genuine blue-blood from recently destroyed Alderaan, arrived with Viscount Tardi – at least, at the time I believed it was Tardi – at Checkpoint LH48. The princess and viscount had arrived to complete a loan that would help replenish the Rebel fleet, as I understand. On her heels was Lord Darth Vader, ostensibly on Imperial business. Evidence indicates, however, that Lord Vader's presence was anything but coincidental. As noted in the entry records, Vader arrived with three attendants: a porter native to the high-gravity world Rigel VII, a secretary that I believe was a shapeshifter, and a valet who, I learned, was a member of a powerfully telekinetic species. Interestingly, all three represented species listed as nearly extinct in the Great Databank of Aargau. According to my sources, each was a bonded member of the assassin's guild specializing in unarmed killing.

Over the course of the next few days, Vader's attendants made bold individual attempts on Tardi's life. Holofile 3F shows the damage that resulted from the first attack. The Rigellian leapt from an overpass onto a taxi speeder carrying the princess, the "viscount," and their droids. The impact of the massive brute totaled the speeder, but eyewitnesses report the princess quickly dispatched the would-be assassin by using a standard gravitational field disruptor, available in most spaceport duty-free shops, to exponentially increase the Rigellian's weight. I believe his remains are now in the planet's core, and therefore irretrievable. Incidentally, I recommend putting field disruptors on the list of proscribed weapons immediately.

See evidence bag 4A for the second assassin's remains. As you can see, the shapeshifter had taken the form of an extinct poisonous butterfly, proof positive that what you see is not truly an insect. He apparently hoped to strike at the princess and the "viscount" during a ceremony at the Garden of Butterflies with his poisonous stinger. Apparently, the Rebel leader's own protocol droid happened also to be an insect expert and spotted the ersatz butterfly in time to warn the assassin's targets. The damage to the specimen was inflicted by Princess Organa's boot.

Princess Organa herself personally described Vader's final assassination attempt to me. As Vader and Organa sparred verbally, the telekinetic assassin attempted to bring a low-yield antipersonnel missile down from orbit onto Viscount Tardi's head. Since the alien had to "see" his target through the electronic eyes of the missile he controlled, Organa's astromech droid was able to trick the assassin into unintentional suicide by broadcasting a color hologram of Tardi over the assassin himself.

The final confrontation appears to have taken place at the Old Spaceport around midnight, hours before both defendants departed Aargau. Vader and the princess apparently arranged to meet, perhaps to settle their scores once and for all, at this location. Security holocams caught much of the conversation and subsequent events, which revealed that both had smuggled weapons onto the planet in their sealed diplomatic pouches, and that "Viscount Tardi" was a cleverly programmed but nonsentient automaton – the real Tardi, it appears, has been deceased for over a month. But since the Rebels' loan has already been completed and sealed, this obviously does not negate the loan approval. However, I do recommend that the Customs division heads reconsider the policy against searching diplomatic pouches.

The final element of this curious crime spree caught me completely by surprise, and will likely be impossible to prosecute -- Darth Vader somehow acquired the Crown Jewels of Alderaan, which the princess had put up as collateral for the loan. It appears this was the Sith Lord's goal all along, as Tardi's artificial nature came as no surprise to Vader. Furthermore, no records exist of any transaction that would have left the Jewels in Vader's grasp. Which leaves us with two outstanding mysteries: How did Vader do it, and why? Is the Sith Lord so spiteful that he would take the jewels simply to crush the princess's spirit?

In closing, I regret to report that I do not believe these gross violations of all three Aargauun Statutes will be successfully punished in the near future. However, barring any further revelations, I recommend that Leia Organa and/or Darth Vader be arrested on sight if either returns to Aargau.

Imperial Rapid Deployment Station

"Bad news. The Imperials must have decided that your activities warranted closer inspection. They've dropped a prefabricated outpost not more than three kilometers from your current position. I can't get any closer—their sensors have picked me up already and I can see a scout team suiting up. So far, it's just a single unit, one of the compact models. Looks like the target site has sensors and some light weapons, maybe a 15-man outpost. Not difficult for a strike team to deal with. Remember what happened on Porchello, though: if we vape the base, we'll be up to our necks in snowmen in a hurry...make sure it looks like a natural disaster or animal attack, team. Scout 21 ending transmission."

—*Excerpt from Rebel communication log.*

X-Wing: Alliance

The first seven missions always will be stored in a special cell of my memory bank. I am sure they were special to Ace, too, for they were his first opportunities to exhibit his piloting skills and contribute more to the family business. I know what it is like to be assigned menial maintenance tasks day after day, while others get the more adventurous duties.

Aeron contacted me electronically and said I was to accompany Ace on any missions assigned to him. You can imagine how excited I was to hear that. She also uploaded Corellian transport statistics and updated Azzameen trade routes. I already knew most of this, but the Azzameens had modified their ships, and this meant a few new calculations—nothing challenging for a droid of my caliber, but at least it was fresh data.

I was particularly pleased to find the laser turret gun functional. When I received operating instructions for the turret gun, as well as current combat tactics data and craft identification charts, I knew my existence as a mere maintenance droid was about to change.

Oh, yes—Ace's life was about to change, too.

Aeron's Lesson: Transport Operations

I was not as nervous as Ace was on our first mission. Of course, this is understandable, considering he is human. But even burdened with that flaw, Ace showed a high degree of enthusiasm and confidence. I was proud to be his copilot.

Ace and I were in the *Sabra* and Aeron piloted the *Selu*, both Corellian YT-1300 transports. Fine ships.

We exited Azzameen Home Base in Aeron's wake and spotted the cargo canisters right in front of us. Ace pulled close to the canister on the left and made a perfect pick-up. Based on what I have learned of

human expressions, it might very well have been "accidental." No matter, the job was done.

Aeron instructed us to target and head toward the nav buoy. We did so, following her, and when we were within .5 clicks of the buoy we hit the hyperdrive. It was my first time in hyperspace (Ace's, too), and, let me tell you, I almost blew a couple of excitement resistors.

When we came out of hyperspace, Harlequin Station loomed ahead. I was comforted by the presence of the SPC *Kouerd I*, although I did not anticipate trouble.

Aeron, of course, started instructing Ace in how to dock and drop off the canister. With me as copilot, this was unnecessary, but I remained silent.

I do not wish to be critical of Ace, but his drop-off was not the most graceful I have observed. Damage to the canister was minimal, I am sure. No one else seemed to notice, so, again, I remained silent. Next, Aeron told us to retrieve the canister of fuel cells, CN/K Pi3, so we ID'd it and started our approach.

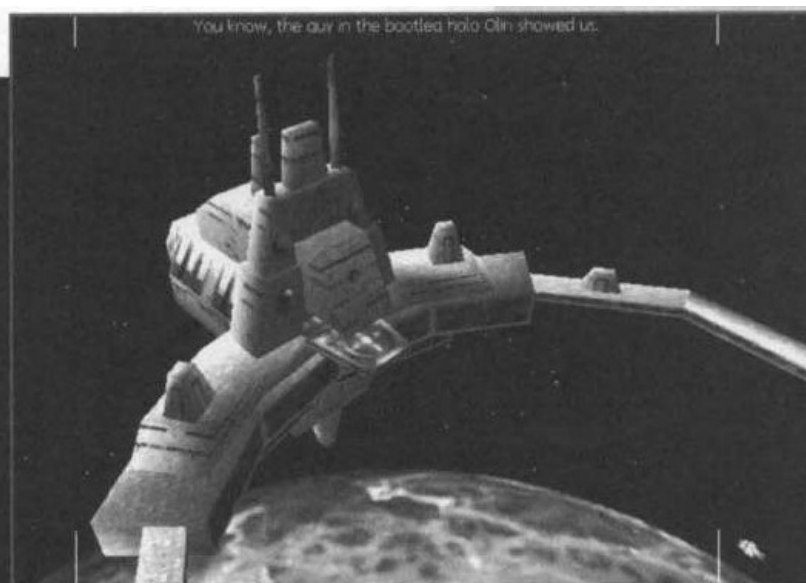


Fig. 4-1. Home, Sweet Home

As we were about to make the pickup, Harlequin Station announced the arrival of two unidentified Pursuer Enforcement Ships (PES). Ace was so distracted he almost rammed the canister, but a quick, sharp bank saved us.

I targeted a Pursuer and we headed toward it to make the identification. I was pleased when Harlequin Station requested our assistance in persuading the intruders to leave the area. Ace went full-throttle toward the target, which told me it was time for action. I moved up to the turret gun.

As we closed on the first Pursuer, it opened fire on us. Ace swerved to avoid the laser blasts and we made the ID as we passed so close I could read the manufacturer's label. It was the PES *Enkidu*.



Fig. 4-2. A Foe for Life

Aeron chased the other vessel, so we ignored it, looped, and brought the *Enkidu* into our sights. Both Ace and I let loose with lasers and struck the target with solid hits. The *Enkidu*'s pilot must have been experienced, because he immediately throttled down and banked out of our sights.

Ace was not quite as quick with the throttle and we overshot the evasive target. This allowed the *Enkidu* to increase throttle and escape. Aeron told us to let them go—which baffles me to this day—and so we did. Into hyperspace they went.

Ace finally calmed down and we picked up the fuel cells canister as ordered. Harlequin Station thanked us for our help as we made the final pickups and headed toward the hyper buoy to home. After arriving safely home, I noted a new expression on Ace's face—pride. I understood.

Emon's Lesson: Weapons

Ace's second mission sounded great the moment I was informed about it. Emon was to lead on this one, and as everyone at Azzameen Home Base knows, when Emon is along on a mission, you should keep your lasers charged.

We hypered out of the Azzameen Home Base sector. Emon piloted his personal Firespray *Andrasta* and Ace and I followed in the CORT *Sabra*. This time, though, we exited into a vacant sector, where Emon pulled ahead to drop off satellite drones for target practice. Some were labeled "Gold" and some "Red," but all were laser fodder.

This was Ace's first time in the laser turret gun position. I took over the piloting duties. Emon instructed me not to fire the frontal lasers: this was Ace's chance to blast things away. Disappointing.

I kept the *Sabra* fairly still as the first group of drones rushed our way. I saw the turret's lasers pierce the void and several times pass quite close to the targets. Ace had some combat simulator experience, but deflection shooting in the real universe is another story.



Fig. 4-3. A Target Drone

We then followed Emon's instructions and hypered to the next practice area. There we encountered a field of junk cargo canisters. Ace started blasting away with turret lasers immediately. In my opinion, this part of the practice session was far too easy. And you would think Emon and Ace would have saved one or two canisters for me, but Emon could not resist getting in there and destroying a few himself. Greed is such a human trait.

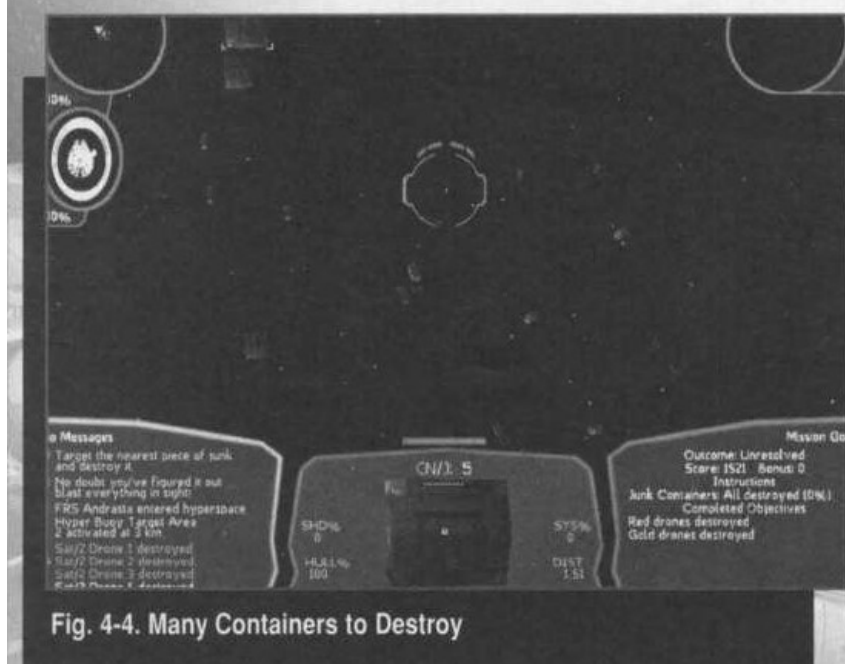


Fig. 4-4. Many Containers to Destroy

I maneuvered the *Sabra* around to allow Ace a better zone of fire as the drones began circling us. Ace was ready this time. I was pleased to see how quickly Ace adapted to the quirks of the turret gun. Three blasts, three drones down. Wonderful! Even Emon had to comment on that round.

The remaining drones met a similar fate, with only a few near-misses. This first round of practice was a success.

Ace and I followed Emon to the sector where Dunari's Casino was located. There Emon and Ace planned a celebratory drink. Of course, neither offered me anything. Typical.

Dunari's Casino has always had a dubious reputation. Factor in Emon's presence and the result can only be *trouble*. That day was no exception. Seemingly from nowhere, a PES and two Razor Fighters appeared in attack formation. I could feel the oil surging through my internal lubrication tubing. Ace was excited, too.

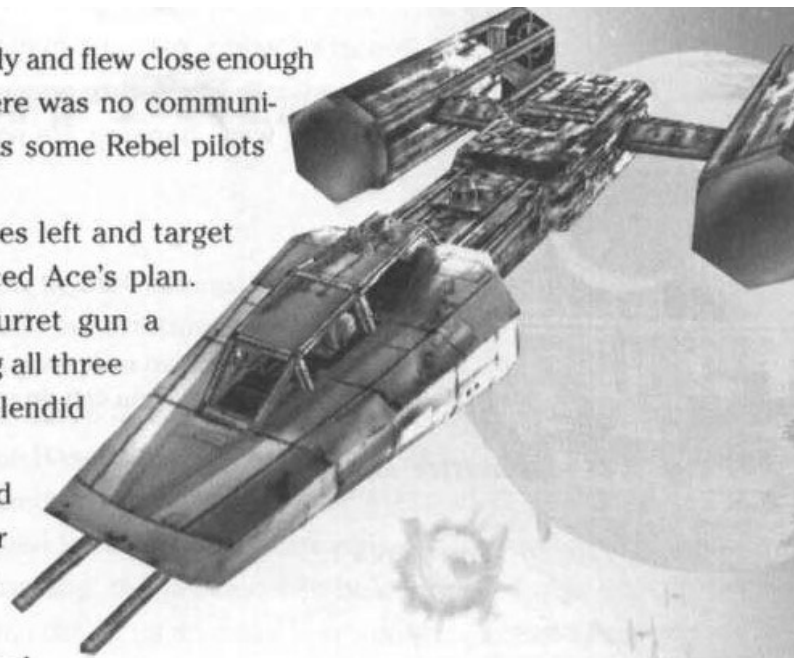
Emon, predictably, reacted aggressively and flew close enough to the Pursuer to ID it as the *Enkidu*. There was no communicating with Emon at this point; he was, as some Rebel pilots express it, *in*.

Ace instructed me to bank 45 degrees left and target the nearest Razor fighter. I easily deduced Ace's plan. This maneuver would give the laser turret gun a clear view of the other two ships, putting all three enemy ships in position for targeting. Splendid thinking, for a human!

Of course, Emon fired first. Emon and the *Enkidu* exchanged multiple laser blasts as they passed each other, but the *Enkidu* absorbed the most damaging hits. Only 2.677 seconds later, Ace targeted a Razor fighter and fired blasts as fast as the mechanisms would allow (.63433-second triggering), while I placed the *Sabra* on a collision course with the other Razor fighter. My shields were fully charged, so I had no intention of shooting it.

It was magnificent! Ace took out his Razor fighter in the first pass! The pilot of the Razor with which I collided didn't appear too happy as he drifted past the cockpit. Then Emon told me that collisions don't count as legitimate kills. I suspect he'd wanted the last Razor for himself.

The fight ended far too quickly. Ace fired the finishing blasts to my targeted Razor and Emon continued inflicting damage on the *Enkidu* right up until it hyperspaced out. Emon believed the *Enkidu* destroyed itself by engaging its hyperdrive. When I pointed out there was a 55 percent chance for survival in a Pursuer-class craft, Emon fired two laser blasts directly over my cockpit. I consider that sort of behavior extremely rude.



We never docked at Dunari's Casino, perhaps because we were ordered to leave. Instead, headed back to Azzameen Home Base. The return was uneventful.

As a result of this mission, Ace was changing. He was becoming a true pilot.

Aeron's Error: Data Recovery

Aeron instructed me not to mention the event that necessitated this mission. Although her accidental trashing of vital security systems data is certainly noteworthy, I will avoid the subject and get right to the mission.

Again, Ace and I were in the *Sabra* and Aeron in the *Selu*. We had three cargo storage areas to inspect before returning to Azzameen Home Base, nothing unusual or risky.

In Cargo Area 1, Aeron told Ace to inspect the Type G cargo canisters while she inspected the Type I canisters. The canisters were arranged in rows to facilitate efficient inspection. Using a calculated flight path and systematic CMD targeting, the process can be completed quickly.

Ace, however, chose a different pattern, costing us an extra four minutes. I'm programmed with a high level of loyalty, and so I didn't say a word. Instead, I occupied myself with scanning the sector for intruders.

My scanning paid off in Cargo Area 2. As Ace flew slowly between the canister rows, I scanned ahead and uncovered a cargo ferry raider hovering in a docking position near a canister.

Ace increased throttle immediately and sped toward the intruder. Aeron hailed it but received no response. It was laser time!

The raider took evasive action, obviously intending escape. Aeron blocked off the raider's escape route and its abrupt change of direction allowed Ace and me a perfect opportunity to bring both front and turret lasers to bear. Seconds later, the raider was only stored data in my memory banks.

The third cargo area provided the most excitement. As we hypered into the area, Aeron alerted us of more intruders. Sure enough, two Razor fighters and a Pursuer were circling the canisters.

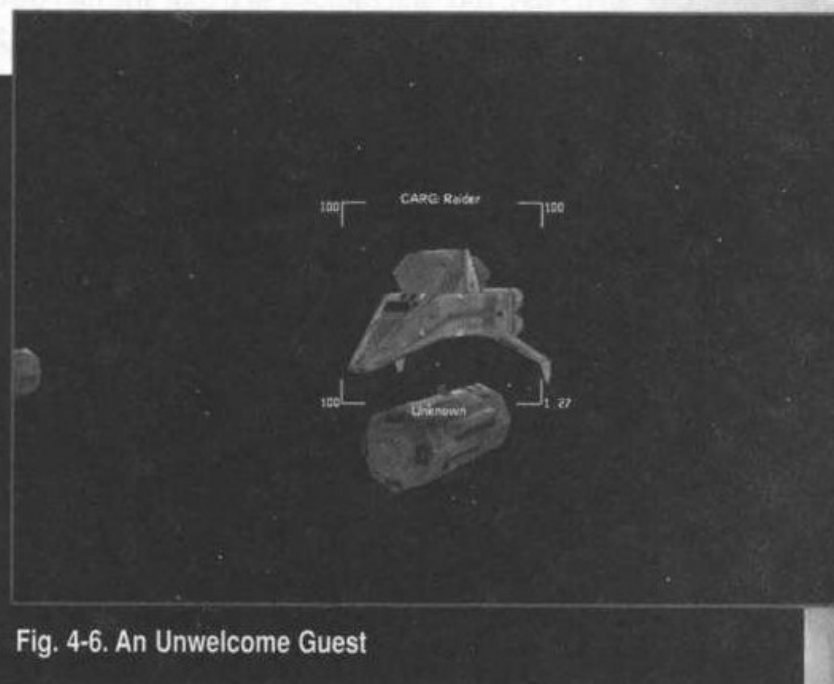


Fig. 4-6. An Unwelcome Guest

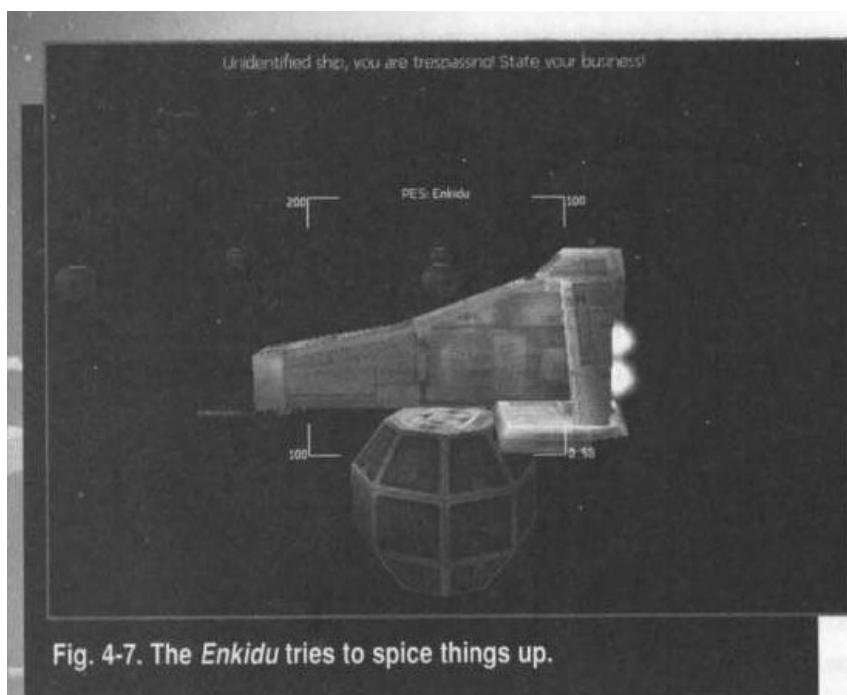


Fig. 4-7. The *Enkidu* tries to spice things up.

Aeron gave chase to the PES to get a solid ID and instructed Ace and me to keep the Razors occupied—music to my frequency sensors! I moved immediately to the turret gun.

The skirmish did not last long. We flew between the two Razors and banked sharply, putting one directly ahead of us and the other directly behind. My crippling laser hits sent the rear Razor spinning out of control, and Ace completely destroyed the other with a superbly accurate volley from the forward laser. What a team we made!

Ace turned to finish off the Razor I had disabled, but we could only watch helplessly as it spiraled into a cargo canister. It was still a kill I could rightfully claim, however.

Aeron had been busy, too. She radioed Ace that she had discovered a container of spice, an illegal substance the Azzameens never would have stored knowingly. Upon my suggestion, we picked up the canister of spice to take it back to Azzameen Home Base. What to do with it could be decided there. It

was risky carrying spice back to home base, but it was riskier leaving it in an Azzameen storage area where Imperial inspectors could find it.

On the way home, Aeron told us she had ID'd the Pursuer craft as the *Enkidu* before it escaped. That ship's name was beginning to have a very negative effect on the Azzameens. As Emon later commented, "Payback time for the *Enkidu* is just around the corner." I did not know what corner he was referring to.



Sticking It To The Viraxos: Covert Delivery

I soon learned what the Azzameens would do with the container of illegal spice discovered in Cargo Area 3. Because Tomaas and Galin were still away on business, Ace's uncle, Antan, devised a plan to return the contraband covertly to the Viraxo facility at Denbo.

Aeron equipped the *Selu* with an erroneous ID transponder. Masquerading as one of the Viraxo's regular supply ships, the *Venix*, she was assigned to drop off the container while Ace and Emon caused a diversion. The diversion would cover her entry and exit—and trigger an Imperial response. Brilliant! The Imperials would find the spice at the Viraxo site, and that would be hard for the Viraxo to explain.

The plan required precise timing. Had the Azzameens left it up to me, the mission would have proceeded flawlessly—droid hindsight, yes, but I have complete confidence in my calculations.

Anyway, the *human* error that threw the whole plan out of sync was Emon's and Ace's premature arrival at Denbo. As expected, laser fire from Emon's Firespray immediately filled the area. Ace and I followed Emon into the fray with the trusty *Sabra*.

From the laser turret gun position, I counted six Razor fighters involved in the ensuing furball. Emon radioed that he had identified the Pursuer *Enkidu*, so I assumed Ace and I were on our own with the Razors. Of the Azzameen siblings, Emon is the least adept at multitasking.

Aeron's voice crackled over the radio: we had arrived too soon. I masterfully kept Ace's flank clear of Razor fighters as I radioed assurance to Aeron.

Ace was in top form, I must say. He already had dispatched two Razors and severely damaged another when Aeron's call for emergency pickup came through. We were too involved with the Razor fighters to answer, but Emon responded and sped past us toward the Denbo facility docking area toward Aeron.

It was up to Ace and me to keep the enemy fighters busy during the rescue. By the time Emon picked up Aeron, Ace had eliminated all but one Razor fighter—and it was sparking like a busy repair droid. I noted that only seconds remained before Imperial forces were due to arrive, but Ace continued his pursuit of the last Razor.



Two more Razor fighters exited the Denbo facility as Emon ordered us to follow him into hyperspace. Emon's Firespray blinked off the CMD while we were still 4.66 klicks from the hyperpoint. Ace had the discipline to disengage and follow Emon's orders, tempting as it was to hang around to finish off the damaged Razor.

I was distraught that Ace felt the need to destroy the *Venix* on the way out, but at least he was quick about it. It was a good thing, too, because as we got within 1.2 klicks of the entry point, a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer appeared on the grid. There was not even time to wave good-bye.

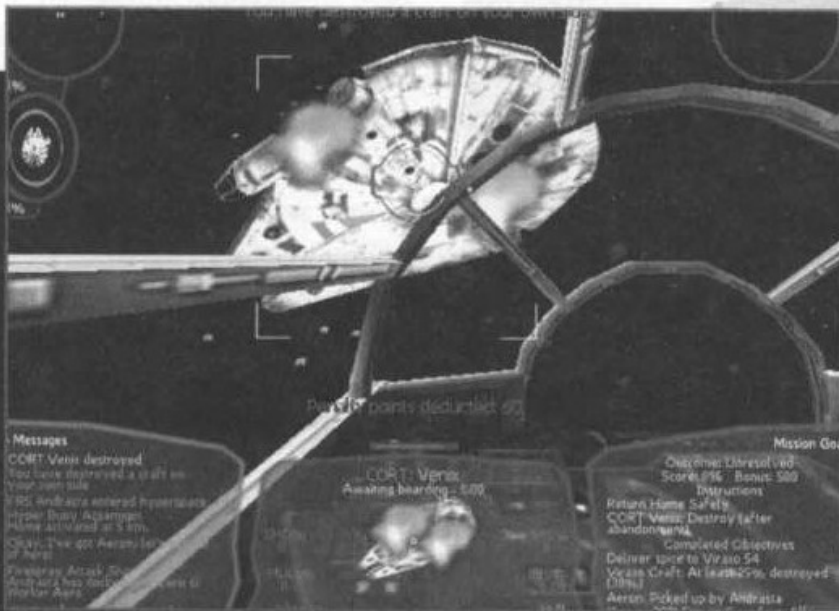


Fig. 4-9. Alas, poor *Venix*

Emon and Aeron were lining up to dock when Ace and I entered the Azzameen Home Base sector. Emon complained that he had had only one chance to destroy the *Enkidu*. This was not logical, but I refrained from commenting. I did, however, mention Ace's five confirmed kills and my indispensable assistance.

It was a cheerful day at the Azzameen Home Base.

Black Market Bacta: Cargo Transfer

When Tomaas briefed us on this mission, I almost blew a capacitor: the Azzameens were to help the Rebel Alliance! Emon, Aeron, Ace, and I would fly escort for Tomaas and Galin on a secret pick-up of bacta for the Rebels.

Ace and I were assigned the *Sabra* and Emon, as usual, piloted the *Andrasta*. Aeron was the lucky one, with Tomaas's YT-2000, the *Otana*. We would cover Tomaas and Galin, in the *Vasudra*, as they transferred the bacta from the smuggler vessel.

Ace and I were thrilled to have the opportunity to help the Alliance in their struggle against the Empire. I was not thrilled at the prospect of meeting a smuggler craft at Saruwen Station to get the transfer location's coordinates. Smugglers are notorious for reneging on their agreements. But I was a mere droid, so no one listened to me.

We all exited hyperspace within milliseconds of each other. The SCT *Ravenno*, the smuggler vessel we were supposed to rendezvous with, awaited us at Saruwen Station. I scanned the area for suspicious craft, but none registered. The Azzameens seemed confident. After a brief communication with the *Ravenno*, the *Vasudra* began receiving coordinates for the cargo transfer.

We were to follow the *Ravenno* into hyperspace using the transmitted coordinates. I noticed that Ace kept the *Ravenno* targeted on the CMD and his front laser sights charged the entire time. If I did not know better, I would have thought Ace was part droid.

We exited hyperspace into a desolate sector. The coded coordinates the *Ravenno* had transmitted to us autoerased upon arrival.

Awaiting us was a Xiytar transport, soon ID'd as the *End Run*. Following brief communications with this vessel, Tomaas and

Galin docked with it and began pumping the bacta into the *Vasudra*. Meantime, Emon and Aeron patrolled the sector, prepared for intrusions.

Soon the *End Run* radioed it was having problems with the pumps, and the *Vasudra* should stand by—a disturbing proposal. Aeron, especially, was alarmed by this, and at once began slicing into their computer systems. Quick thinking, for a human.

Two Zero G technicians exited the Xiytar craft, supposedly to make the repairs. Aeron noticed the techs were heading for the *Vasudra*'s engines, not the pumps. It was a setup!

Sure enough, a Corellian gunship hypered into the sector, escorted by a pair of CloakShape fighters. To my surprise, the gunship fired first, not Emon. He quickly followed suit, joining Aeron to attack the gunship (identified as the *Loose Cannon*). Ace was told to take out the Zero G technicians. My name was not mentioned, so I felt at liberty to target the CloakShape fighters and did so.

Ace dispatched the Zero Gs with a few well-executed laser blasts, while I kept the CloakShapes at bay until Ace was ready to turn and engage them. When he did, their fate was assured: they were history.

As the last CloakShape fighter exploded into debris, I noted the Corellian gunship bursting internally. Seconds later, it, too, was nothing more than space debris.

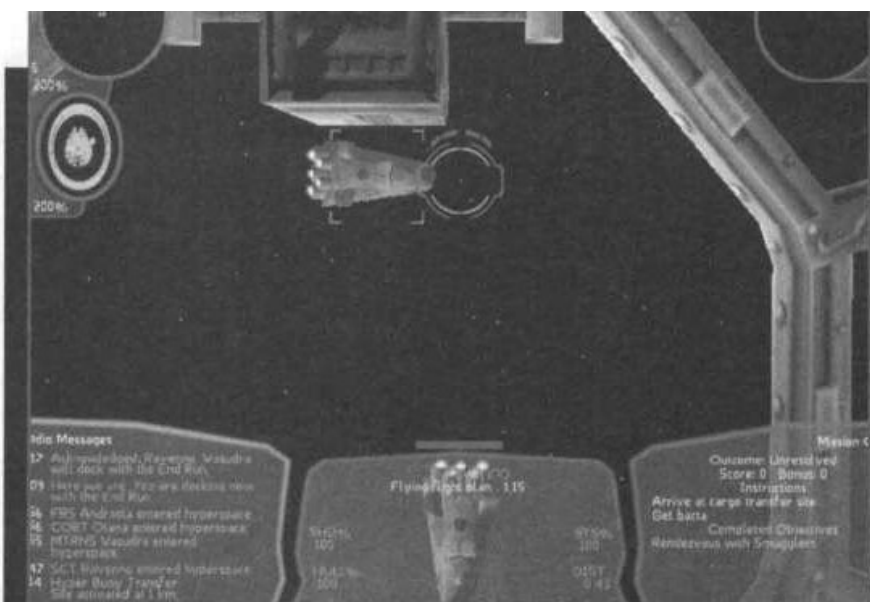
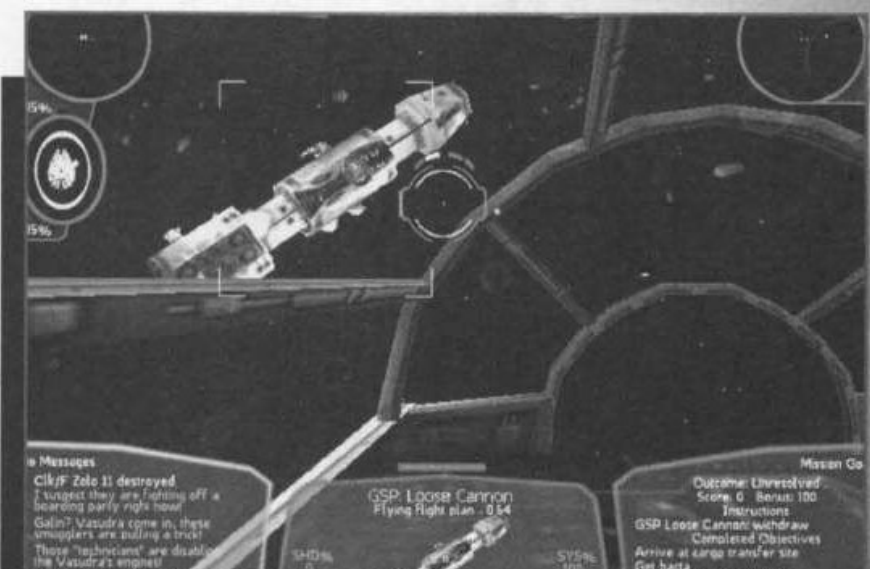


Fig. 4-10. Keeping a Close Eye on SCT *Ravenno*



We all converged on the *End Run* to deliver a coordinated final blow, but before we could pull within laser range, Tomaas ordered us to let the Xiyytar ship escape. Emon, clearly upset at the damage to his Firespray from the gunship, radioed a series of colorful expressions everyone pretended not to hear.

Tomaas exhibited commendable restraint with his decision to let the *End Run* escape. In this case, however, I must side with Emon. As Emon so delicately expressed it: "We should have toasted them!"

Perhaps another day.

Rebel Rendezvous: Aid The Alliance

Had the Azzameens foreseen this mission's results, they never would have committed themselves. I, of course, was well aware of all the possibilities, but I was not allowed to voice those that negatively represented the odds for survival. It was a completely illogical (human) response perpetrated by the famous Han Solo: "*Never tell me the odds.*"

What did they purchase me for?

The mission started out on a positive note, however. Ace and I were assigned to the *Otana*—the one ship in the Azzameen fleet I looked forward to piloting. We were to join Emon and escort the *Vasudra* to rendezvous with the Rebels. Tomaas and Galin, piloting the *Vasudra*, planned to deliver a supply of bacta to them for their fight against the Empire.

We left Azzameen Home Base in tight formation and hypered to a deep-space colony at Brintwo. There we met with Olin Garn. He piloted a Rebel X-wing fighter. There was no doubt now which side of the galactic struggle the Azzameens were on. I was in 100 percent agreement. I was well-informed of the horrible droid abuse occurring regularly under the Empire's rule. Not to suggest that *any* human hand is squeaky clean on this subject, but that is another story.

We followed Olin via a second hyperpoint to a secret Rebel hospital (a Platform Type 2 structure). A variety of Rebel vessels were there—freighters, transports, corvettes, frigates, and light cruisers, to name a few. We were deep in Rebel territory, now.

Trouble began almost immediately. As Emon put it, "We're in deep space without a thruster now."

The Imperial II Star Destroyer *Corrupter*, backed up by two *Lancer*-class frigates, entered the sector. Their sudden appearance did not go over well with the Rebel forces present. There were even a few radio messages casting suspicion on the Azzameens. But there was no time to argue: it was combat mode for this droid!

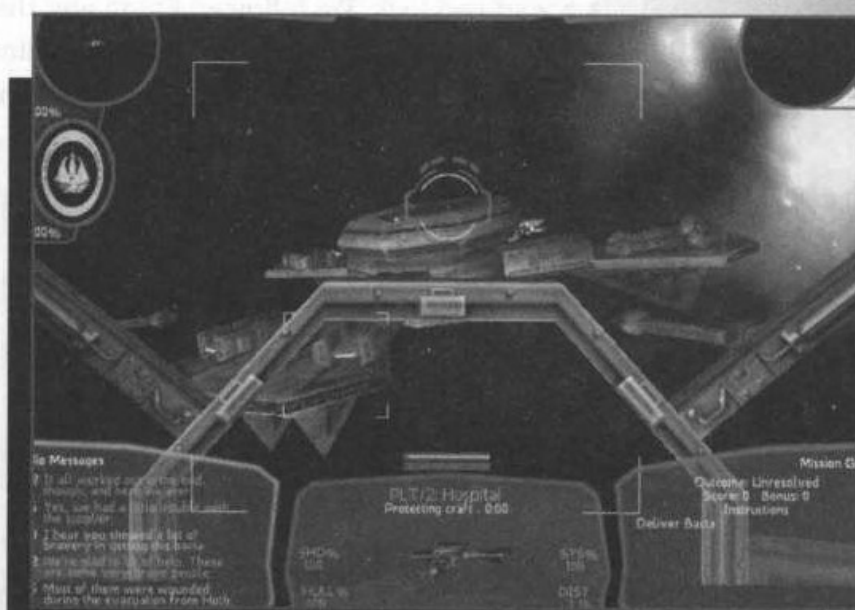


Fig. 4-12. The Rebel Hospital Base

We were ordered to join the Rebel fighter screen to protect the friendly ships as they prepared to evacuate people from the hospital platform. Tomaas and Galin needed time, too, to transfer the bacta to a Rebel ship. The *Corrupter* had launched TIE fighters and bombers, and I think even the humans recognized the unfavorable odds. This was too much Imperial firepower to defeat. It would not be pretty.

I had never witnessed combat of this magnitude, nor had I holofilms of such situations in my memory banks. The influx of data was tremendous. Radio messages jammed the communications system. Calls for help, cheers for minor victories, and reports of destroyed craft poured in.

Ace and I had destroyed four TIE fighters when Imperial assault transports and TIE bombers appeared on our CMD, heading straight for the hospital—and the docked *Vasudra*. Ace disengaged a crippled TIE fighter and maneuvered to intercept them. Emon was unavailable, so it was just Ace and me against two ATRs, two TIE bombers, and three TIE fighters. Those odds were fine with him, Ace said, and then he fired his forward lasers at the closest target, an ATR. It was a wise selection; I was sure the Imperials preferred capturing the bacta to destroying it.

We were unable to stop the other ATR before it could open fire on the vulnerable *Vasudra*. There was nothing we could do; the *Vasudra* took far too many hits and came to an abrupt stop. It was hopelessly disabled.

Suddenly, the hospital platform erupted in a series of horrific explosions. Considering its proximity to the *Vasudra*, we were forced to evade. The shock waves shook our YT-2000 and my sensors registered a sudden increase in temperature. It was a close one.

Emon instructed us to evacuate the sector immediately: four assault gunboats had arrived and were trying to attain a warhead lock. We followed Emon and the surviving Rebel ships into hyperspace, but on different coordinates. Ace and I had destroyed nine TIE fighters, one ATR (Ace struck the ATR as it docked to board the *Vasudra*—a superb demonstration of gunnery skills), and 10 TIE bombers. Still, it did not feel like a victory.

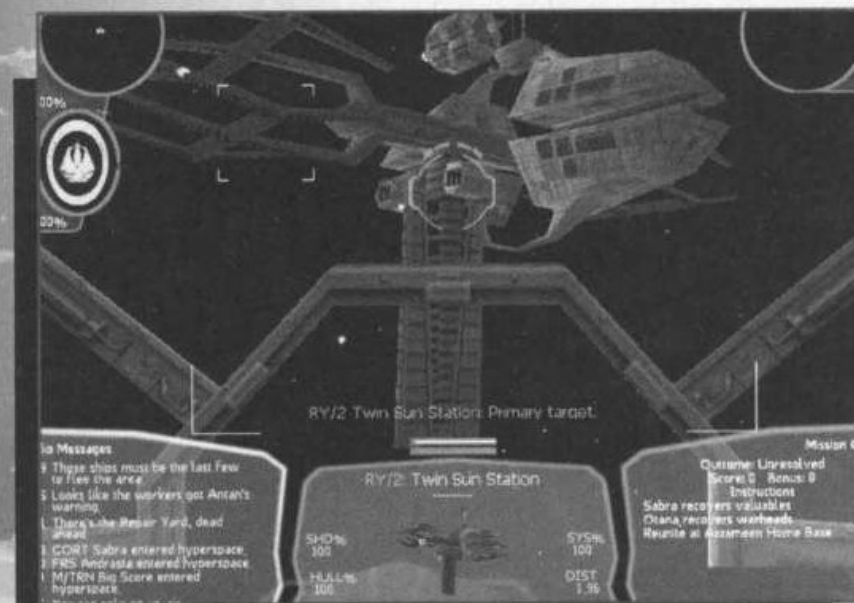


There was an uncharacteristic silence after we arrived at Azzameen Home Base. Tomaas and Galin Azzameen did not return. It was not known whether they had died in battle or been captured by the Imperials. Either way, it was a devastating loss.

Nowhere To Go: Escape Imperial Attack

When it was announced the Empire had issued warrants for all Azzameen family members (I include myself), I was not surprised. We had cost them plenty of TIE fighters, I am proud to say.

Antan issued orders to prepare for possible evacuation of Azzameen facilities. He would take his M/AT *Big Score*, and, along with Emon in the FRS *Andrasta*, would retrieve valuable materials from the Azzameen cargo facilities. Meanwhile, Ace and I (again in the *Otana*) would accompany Aeron's CORT *Sabra* to the Twin Suns Station repair facility. Aeron was to pick up some family treasures within the facility; Ace was to collect a cargo container of warheads.



These warheads were of utmost importance to the Alliance, not to mention a tidy profit in the exchange for the Azzameens. Antan's mercenary attitude toward the Rebellion was unpopular among the Azzameen siblings, and his personality could be abrasive, but he had a good mind for business.

Everything went fine at the repair facility—for the first 20 seconds. Ace maneuvered the *Otana* in front of the docking bay where the warheads container awaited us and entered slowly. Fortunately, I had

been scanning the sector repeatedly and could announce the presence of a large group of Imperial and Viraxo ships the moment it appeared.

As expected, the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer immediately released a group of TIE fighters. This did not inspire Aeron with confidence. She needed more time to complete her tasks. It was up to Ace and me both to pick up the warheads *and* to engage the TIEs.

To make matters worse, I noticed the Viraxo corvette (identified now as the CRV *Blast Radius*) was moving into attack position, and the CMD registered incoming landing craft and Razor fighters. The latter, I knew, were Viraxo ships.

Ace increased shield and laser energy levels and targeted the nearest TIE fighter. Two quick laser blasts and that TIE disappeared from the CMD screen. Ace's quick maneuvering allowed us to avoid the wreckage and any damage it might have done to the attached warheads container.

Aeron had finished by then and radioed for us to follow her to the hyper buoy and back to Azzameen Home Base. I like a good fight as much as any pilot, but I confirmed that this was a wise choice. I believe Ace was

about to make an alternative suggestion—along the lines of *dicta Emon*—when a solid hit from the corvette's ion cannons shook the *Otana*. Ace changed his mind.

Emon was patrolling the sector when we arrived. A number of transports and freighters filled with Azzameen employees and supplies were preparing to exit the sector. Then Emon shocked us all by announcing that Imperials had captured Antan's ship at a cargo facility. There was a sudden communal understanding that the Azzameen family was in more than just deep space with the Empire.

Ace reported the warheads were unscathed. I pointed out that the report easily could have been more negative, and that it would have been wiser to fight unencumbered and reacquire the warheads on the way out. I started to add that the *Otana* had suffered 50 percent shield damage but Ace rudely disabled my external communications circuits. I was within my rights to voice my displeasure with this, and barely had begun to do so, when Ace disabled my *internal* communications circuits. I made a silent notation in my Droid Abuse diary.

Just then, a small force of Viraxo fighters entered our sector. That they sent so few craft indicated they thought the Azzameen family would have been long gone by then. Ace and Aeron seemed all too happy to prove them wrong. Emon arrived soon after the last Razor fighter was blasted to space dust. The three Azzameen siblings discussed their next move. Ace didn't see fit to reactivate my communications system, so I was limited to passive participation.

Because the last few Azzameen plans did not execute as expected, I was pleased to realize that they had no time to make another one: an Imperial Star Destroyer entered the sector, come to take Azzameen Home Base.



Fig. 4-15. Viraxo landing craft prepare to capture Twin Suns Station.

The employee ships entered hyperspace without hesitation. Emon, Aeron, and Ace all turned toward the hyper buoy to follow suit. Ace reactivated my communications circuits and I immediately announced the presence of multiple groups of TIE fighters, interceptors, and bombers on an intercept course. Off went my communications systems again. *Really!*

The Azzameens flew into the center of the swarm of Imperial fighters, blazing away. Perhaps the pressures of the Empire–Azzameen–Rebel–Viraxo situation had pushed them over the edge, but what other choice did we have?

We all exited hyperspace into a secure Rebel sector and heaved a unanimous sigh of relief. All our vessels displayed heavy damage. Sparks and debris trailed us as we approached the CRS *Defiance* for docking. The warheads container suffered minor external damage.

It was good to be out of immediate danger, and the *Defiance* was kind enough to offer us docking space. But it was not *home*.

Joining The Rebellion

The Azzameen Home Base was now in the hands of the Empire and its sector designated off-limits. Emon departed the *Defiance* and set out to find contacts, establish a new base of operations for the family business, and get into loads of trouble.

Aeron went about consolidating the Azzameen assets and slicing her way into sometimes quite profitable ventures. I was assigned to pilot the *Otana* when necessary—not often enough.

Ace, the *lucky* one, joined the Rebellion. I was both pleased and disappointed—pleased because I knew Ace wanted to be a Rebel pilot, and disappointed because I could not go with him. What were all my piloting and gunnery circuits installed for, anyway?

The Empire was on the move and growing in power. The Rebel Alliance was attempting to organize itself into a comparable fighting force, while striking at the Imperials wherever they were vulnerable and weak. I did not see how the Rebels ever could become a *comparable* force, but they did occasionally manage to squeeze victory from a hopeless situation.

Most missions that occurred after Ace was recruited were executed without my presence. I have tried my best to obtain accurate and detailed information, but details are rarely accessible in times of maximum security. Only those few times when I teamed with Ace again did I have full access to mission details.

Had the humans more foresight, they might have included more highly trained, intelligent, combat-ready MK-09 maintenance droids on their rosters. They never learn.

Vader Adrift

"Did you hear about Darth Vader, sir?"

The veteran Stormtrooper turned his white-helmeted head to see his younger counterpart approaching across the spaceport's shuttle launch pad. In a gravelly voice, the veteran trooper said, "What's that, TK-813?"

The younger trooper came to a stop. "Darth Vader, sir. He's here."

The veteran glanced at the large boxshaped shuttle that had just touched down and was now resting on its thrusters beside a nearby gantry. "Lord Vader's at the garrison?"

"No." TK-813 pointed up to the sky.

"On the Tarkin."

The two Stormtroopers were among those stationed at the spaceport on the planet Hockaleg in the Patriim system, where the Tarkin, an Imperial battle station, was under construction in Hockaleg's orbit. Named in honor of the late Grand Moff Tarkin, the battle station consisted of a massive, planet-shattering ionic cannon that was bracketed by hyperdrive engines and defensive shield generators. Shaped like a concave dish, the ionic cannon resembled the Death Star's main offensive battery, but was without the Death Star's flaws-or so its designers claimed. Although the Tarkin was considerably smaller than the Death Star, it was still so large that it was visible in Hockaleg's blue sky as a rectangular satellite.

The Empire had conscripted a number of humans for the ground operations at Hockaleg's spaceport-a tight sprawl of mostly ramshackle structures-and the veteran looked around to make sure none of the locals were listening. Satisfied, the veteran tilted his head back to look skyward and said, "Who told you Lord

TK-813 thought for a moment, then said, "Grimes overheard someone at headquarters mention it."

"Grimes?" The veteran looked back at TK-813. "Who's Grimes?"

"You know, sir. He's TK-592. No, I mean, he's... uh, TK-529."

The veteran sighed impatiently through his helmet's respirator.

"When did he tell you?"

"Not long ago, sir. Just after you cleared the last flight to the Tarkin."

The veteran glanced at the landed shuttle, looked back at TK-813, and said, "At our next rotation, you, 'Grimes,' and I are going to walk over to headquarters so we can have a chat about the importance of maintaining military protocol and distributing information on a need-to-know basis. I suspect a number of laborers on Hockaleg have no fondness for the Empire. For all we know, some could be Rebel spies."

"Yes, sir."

But the veteran wasn't listening. He was focused on the bright, yellowish glint that appeared to be growing across the top of TK-813's helmet. The veteran twisted his neck sharply to look skyward again. The rectangular point of light he had seen earlier had transformed into an expanding blossom of fire.

TK-813 followed the veteran's gaze and said, "Oh, no. Is that the Tarkin?"

"It was."

"Sir, what should we...?"

But the elder trooper was already running for the shuttle, taking his blaster rifle with him.

* * *

Darth Vader was seated in the cockpit of his crippled TIE fighter. The fighter's transparisteel window was shattered and its starboard wing was a mangled mess.

If not for his armored pressure suit and the fighter's reinforced hull, the Dark Lord of the Sith might not have survived the collision with the large chunks of ice that had materialized in his path less than a minute before the Tarkin exploded. Because the explosion had released billions of pieces of debris, as well as electromagnetic radiation that prevented starship-to-starship transmissions - including distress signals-all Vader could do for the moment was sit in his fighter; listen to the rasping noise of his labored, mechanized breathing; and reflect on how he had once again missed an opportunity to capture his son, Luke Skywalker.

Only a few weeks had passed since his duel with Luke on Cloud City. He had traveled to Hockaleg in his personal flagship, the Super Star Destroyer Executor, to inspect the Tarkin. He had never had much regard for so-called superweapons, and had been morbidly amused that the new battle station was named after the commanding officer who had lost the Death Star. His interest in the Tarkin had changed, however, the moment he had sensed Luke's presence on-board.

Vader had previously failed to apprehend Luke at the shipyards of Fondor. And on the planet Aridus. And on Monastery. And Mimban and Verdanth, and, most recently, in Cloud City. With those experiences behind him, Vader had no intention of letting Luke slip away on the Tarkin.

Suspecting the young Rebel would try to sabotage the battle station's main power reactor, Vader had instructed Imperial officer Colonel Nord to remove all security personnel from the reactor areas and to increase sentries along possible escape routes. And then Vader had stood outside a generator room and waited for Luke to walk right into his trap.

Vader had not anticipated that Colonel Nord would try to kill him.

The assassination attempt had distracted Vader long enough for Luke to escape on an Imperial transport. Vader had not had time to deal with the traitorous officer before going to his TIE fighter to pursue Luke. Nor could he stop Luke from transferring to the increasingly which had appeared from out of nowhere. And when someone had dumped the Falcon's water supply, Vader had been unable to evade the wall of ice that had rapidly formed in the Falcon's wake.

From his damaged fighter, Vader had watched the Tarkin rotate to direct its ionic cannon at the Falcon, and he realized the impending blast would destroy his fighter, too.

He had no doubt that Colonel

Nord was directing the weapon's aim, or that his chances of escaping the blast were less than nil.

But then the Tarkin had exploded over Hockaleg, launching wide tendrils of burning fuel in all directions. Two nearby Star Destroyers and dozens of smaller vessels were consumed instantly. The explosion's shockwave struck Vader's TIE fighter, knocking it away from the ice and sending it tumbling across space. Debris from the Tarkin sailed past the fighter and buffeted the port-side wing. Vader wrestled with his flight controls, struggling to keep the fighter from straying far beyond Hockaleg's orbit. He spiraled for several seconds before he managed to activate a single thruster and brought the fighter to a relatively dead stop before the thruster burned out.

Vader's eyes shifted behind the lenses of his black metal mask as he looked through his cockpit's damaged window. Wreckage was everywhere. Several kilometers beyond the Tarkin's blazing remains, the Executor was apparently intact, but Vader took little consolation from this observation, because, due to the electromagnetic interference, he could not even signal the Executor to go after the Millennium Falcon. It occurred to him that even if he could get a signal through, the Falcon had probably already left the Patriim system.

And then he saw a white saucer-shaped blur speeding out of Hockaleg's orbit, and realized he had spotted the Falcon. He was about to use the Force to call out to Luke, but then the freighter vanished into hyperspace. And once again, Vader felt robbed.

He had to make Luke his ally. Luke had to yield to the dark side of the Force and join him. Unless that happened, Vader would never be able to overthrow his own Master, the Emperor Palpatine.

Vader saw a large piece of twisted metal moving toward his fighter, and he reached out with the Force to send the debris off in a different trajectory.

He wondered how the Emperor would react when he learned of the Tarkin's destruction. With the Emperor's far-reaching powers, it was possible that he was already aware of what had happened in Hockaleg's orbit. Although Palpatine would undoubtedly express his displeasure at losing the Tarkin, he had been lately more preoccupied by the construction of the second Death Star in the Endor system. Vader assumed the Emperor would likely send him to Endor to ensure that the new Death Star did not follow the Tarkin's fate. Thinking of this prospect, Vader fumed. He was a soldier, not a building supervisor, and he had grown weary of working with scheming officers and incompetent bureaucrats. He checked his comm system again and heard nothing but static on every frequency. The Executor's crew had been aware that he was in his TIE fighter when the Tarkin exploded, and he surmised they had already sent out search teams to recover him. He also suspected that he could be in for a long wait. Unable to use their ship's sensors to locate his fighter, the teams would have to use their own eyes to find him amidst the scattered debris. Although he didn't entirely trust any member of his crew, he did trust that they would find him sooner than later. After all, they knew the price of failure.

Fear kept everyone in place.

But then he thought of the late Colonel Nord, who had most certainly feared him, too. Nord hadn't been the first Imperial officer who'd tried to kill Vader, and like most of the other would-be assassins, he hadn't had the courage to take on the Sith Lord directly. The problem with such cowards, Vader decided, is that they're not more afraid.

As Vader watched for any sign of the expected search teams, he wondered who or what might try to kill him next. He wondered about this with something resembling fervor, as he had become increasingly eager, over the years, to rid the galaxy of anything that threatened him or tested his patience. He welcomed the unexpected because he knew it could not kill him. He was confident that he would continue to survive because he always did. He sincerely believed his survival was the will of the Force.

He sighted a spacecraft moving toward his position. He was surprised to see that it was not a ship from the Executor, but rather a boxy shuttle from Hockaleg. He tested his fighter's running lights, then flashed them to draw the shuttle pilot's attention. As the shuttle drew closer,

Vader looked to its main viewport, and was further surprised to see the craft was helmed by an Imperial Stormtrooper.

Vader switched on his fighter's interior lights so the trooper could see him clearly.

He raised one black-gloved hand, pointed at the shuttle, then pointed above his head to the fighter's egress hatch. The trooper responded with a nod. Vader watched the trooper expertly maneuver the shuttle to position its starboard side as close as possible to the top of the fighter's cockpit.

Vader slid back the egress hatch above his black-helmeted head, rose from his seat, and launched himself through space to the waiting shuttle. The trooper had already opened the starboard airlock. Vader guided his body into the shuttle, and the airlocks outer hatch slid shut behind him. The chamber soon pressurized and then the inner hatch opened. Vader proceeded to the shuttle's bridge, where he found the armored trooper standing at attention. Vader gazed down at the trooper, and his deep voice echoed in the bridge as he said: "Why isn't an Imperial pilot in command of this vessel?"

Without hesitation, the trooper replied, "I was stationed at the shuttle launching pad on Hockaleg when the Tarkin exploded, Lord Vader. I left my post to search for survivors."

Vader recognized the trooper's distinctive voice and clipped manner of speech. "You served in the Clone Wars."

It wasn't a question.

But the trooper replied, "Yes, sir."

"And you are an experienced pilot."

"Yes, sir."

"Then why," Vader said, "are you in Stormtrooper armor?"

"I was demoted, sir."

"Why?"

"I disobeyed an order and assaulted a superior officer twenty years ago, sir," the trooper replied, no trace of regret in his voice.

Vader was impressed by the trooper's strong composure. In fact, he did not sense any fear in the trooper. And although Vader lived and breathed to instill fear-especially in subordinates-he did not feel any compulsion to rattle this particular soldier, who exuded reliability as well as loyalty. Instead, Vader simply asked, "What was your operational unit during the Clone Wars?"

"Shadow Squadron, sir."

Vader's breathing apparatus made a small wrenching noise. "If you were in Shadow Squadron, you were trained by...?"

"General Skywalker, sir. Do you wish to return to your Star Destroyer?"

"Not yet," Vader said. He gestured at the shuttle's controls. "Leave a distress strobe with my fighter and then take me to the garrison on Hockaleg."

As the trooper deployed a beacon, he said, "Begging your pardon, sir, but when the search team finds your fighter empty, they may assume that you're adrift."

"So be it," Vader said as he lowered himself onto the copilot's seat.

* * *

As the shuttle descended through Hockaleg's atmosphere, Vader said, "I am curious about the details of your demotion."

"It's all on record, sir," the trooper said, angling the shuttle toward the spaceport.

"I would prefer to hear it from you."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

The trooper cleared his throat.

"You are aware I'm a clone, sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, twenty years ago, after Shadow Squadron was disbanded, I had a new commanding officer-a non-clone. When he ordered me to kill my gunner - who had been wounded in combat, but not mortally - I refused. And when my commanding officer tried to shoot me for refusing, I broke his jaw. I spent a year in solitary."

Vader considered the details, then said, "What happened to the injured clone?"

"He recovered, although he was killed several months later during a bombing run."

"Do you regret your actions?"

"No. sir. Everybody dies. I'm just glad I helped a friend live a bit longer."

As the spaceport came into view, Vader said, "If you were to serve under my command, would you ever disobey an order?"

"Yes, sir, but only if it helped you live longer."

Vader was stunned by the aged clone's words and the implication that he might disobey one of his orders...or that he might consider the Sith Lord a friend. Before he could ask the clone for an explanation, the clone tested the comm and received a loud burst of static. Switching the comm off, he said, "I can't establish contact with spaceport control, sir. We don't have clearance to land." Vader said, "Do you expect any troops will fire at the shuttle?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Take us down."

The shuttle landed beside the launch gantry. The shuttle's boarding ramp extended and the clone stepped out, carrying his blaster rifle. As he led Vader down the shuttle's boarding ramp, he tapped the side of his white helmet and said, "CT-6981 to TK-813, do you read

me? TK-813?" He glanced back at Vader and said, "Just static, sir." At the bottom of the ramp, he looked around and added, "Where is everyone?"

Vader heard shouting in the distance, and then the sound of blasterfire. He turned to the clone, and could tell by the tilt of the clone's helmet that he heard the shots too. They looked toward an alley between two nearby buildings and saw a Stormtrooper emerge, firing his blaster rifle behind him as he ran. He stumbled and collapsed, face down on the ground.

"TK-813!" The clone ran to the fallen trooper and rolled him over. Blood flowed out from under TK-813's chest plate. The clone hauled the younger Stormtrooper behind a small shack while Vader strode toward them, his eyes focused on the alley.

"What happened?" the clone said to the injured trooper.

"You were right about the laborers, sir," the trooper gasped. "They don't like...the Empire. After they saw the... Tarkin blow, they attacked the headquarters, and then...."

The trooper's body went slack.

"He's gone," the clone said.

"Stay with me," Vader said. He walked fast toward the shuttle, the clone keeping close to his back. They were halfway to the ship when five armed men in grease-stained coveralls ran out from behind the gantry and started firing at them. Without breaking his stride, Vader raised his right hand and deflected the energy bolts with ease.

He assumed the five men recognized him and were aware of his capabilities because they gaped and cringed as they lowered their blasters.

Keeping his gaze fixed on the men, Vader said to the clone, "Board the shuttle and prepare for..."

Vader was interrupted by another round of blaster fire, followed by a clatter of armor behind him. He glanced back and saw the clone sprawled on the ground, clutching at his left side. Another group of laborers had emerged on the launch pad and now faced Vader too. They all looked very afraid.

Ignoring the laborers, the Dark Lord dropped to one knee beside the clone. The clone was still breathing, but Vader could tell that he wouldn't last long.

The clone said, "I couldn't just walk away and... let them hit you, sir."

Vader removed the clone's helmet. Although the clone still resembled Jango Fett, his face was more heavily lined with age and his hair was mostly white. Vader said, "Contrail, when we were with Shadow Squadron, at the Battle of the Kaliida Nebula, your call sign was Shadow Eleven. You flew well."

The clone did not seem surprised that Vader knew his name and details about Shadow Squadron. He smiled and said, "I had...a good teacher, sir." And then his eyes went shut and he died.

Vader rose and directed his gaze to the men who had shot the clone.

One of the men said, "Lord Vader, please forgive us. We didn't know you were on Hockaleg."

"I was adrift," Vader said as he drew his lightsaber and ignited its glowing crimson blade. "Allow me to thank you all for bringing me back."

Planet of the Hoojibs

Chewbacca skillfully steered the Rebel survey ship into orbit around a mysterious planet. Princess Leia studied the lush, green land below. "It's called Arbra, Chewie. If our reports are correct, it could be the perfect place for a secret Rebel base." The Wookiee growled a warning.

Leia nodded. "Sure, it could be dangerous. But we've been in hairy spots before. Er, no offense, Chewie."

After landing, the Rebel survey team mounted their air bikes and began their exploration of Arbra. The golden droid, C-3PO. Set about collecting and processing data. "I wish Artoo was here to see all this. It's much nicer than that ice planet, Hoth."

Princess Leia was encouraged by what she saw. "Good climate. Lots of natural resources. The thick growth of trees will give us perfect air cover. And from the looks of it, no dangerous animals. We might have found just what we're looking for. Okay, team, let's make camp here tonight."

The place seemed safe enough. But as the Rebels set up camp, they were being carefully watched.

The exhausted Rebel team settled into their cozy camp. Soon they found themselves overrun by hundreds of the furry, lopeared creatures that Leia had seen earlier. C-3PO introduced their tiny guests. "They're Hoojibs, Your Highness, the natives of this planet. Not very intelligent. I'm afraid."

"I think they're adorable."

One particularly playful Hoojib took a liking to Chewbacca, much to his dismay. The little creature snuggled around the giant Wookiee's neck. Leia couldn't resist teasing. "Why, I think he's adopted you, Chewie. And you thought there was danger here! Now weren't you wrong?"

However, Chewie's instincts had been right \227 there was danger on the planet! And not even the night patrol could protect the sleeping camp from it.

But it was not some horrible terror in the darkness. The danger was in the cute, cuddly Hoojibs that the unsuspecting Rebels had befriended.

C-3PO was sitting on a tree slump in the "shut-down" mode when his emergency sensors were activated. He awakened to find hungry Hoojibs feasting on the electronic circuits in his leg. "Ouch! I'm being eaten alive! Help! Oh, someone help me! Shoo!Shoo!"

Gemmer, chief of the Rebel guards, raced to the rescue. Code red! Activate flood lights. Secure the area." But when the switches were thrown the huge camp lights failed.

"It's those Hoojibs. They're energy eaters! Get them off me!" sputtered C-3PO. But by the time Gemmer reached the droid, the Hoojibs were scurrying away.

Princess Leia watched the fleeing creatures. "We can't let them escape. Chewie, grab one!"

The huge Wookiee calmly reached down and scooped up one of the escaping animals. But he was in for a shock when the tiny Hoojib spoke! "Put me down, you great hairy beast!"

An amazed Princess Leia was handed the small captive. 'Hey, this little guy can talk. But our ream reports said that Arbra contained no intelligent life."

The tiny Hoojib huffed a tiny huff. "I am Plit, my good creature, and I daresay more intelligent than that shaggy beast that grabbed me."

"Then tell me why you made a midnight snack out of our power supply."

"Yes, we do owe you an explanation. Ages ago, our Hoojib ancestors made their home in a crystal cavern near here. Inside are huge crystals which draw power from the center of the planet and transform it into pure energy. This is what we live on."

"But with so much food at home, why hit us up for dinner?"

"We were forced out of our home by a b-b-beast!"

Leia shook her head. "Come on, Plif. What beast?"

"Tha-that one!" A blast of wind hit the camp as a huge, winged beast raged overhead! A writhing mass of tentacles on the underside of the monster's body grabbed up a helpless soldier.

Leia drew her laser gun and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened! "The Hoojibs even drained our blasters!"

Gemmer dashed to her side. "I was on guard duty when they hit. Here, my blaster is still charged." Leia seized the weapon and fired! The stunned beast dropped the soldier and flew away.

Plif shuddered. "It's called the Slivilith. After drifting in space for years, it made its way to our home. We were forced to flee, surviving on any bits of energy we could find."

The Princess sighed. "Now we're all in the same boat! We'll have to help you get rid of your unwanted guest so we can recharge our energy supplies."

While Leia and Plif plotted their strategy, the rest of the Rebel team made crude spears. After a forced march through the night, they positioned themselves outside the Hoojib's cavernous home.

"All right squad, this will be dangerous. Wait, Plif, where do you think you're going?"

"Don't let our size fool you. We're going to help win our home back!" The courageous Hoojibs hopped to the mouth of the cave. Once in position, the little creatures taunted the beast with their shrill calls.

Something rumbled deep within the cavern. Plif and his friends made a mad dash for safety. In a flash? The Slivilith hurtled from the cave, sending the Hoojibs tumbling! Leia waited until the beast was right overhead. "All right\227NOW!"

A volley of homemade spears took the screeching creature by surprise!

While the Slivilith was distracted, Leia scooped up the disabled blasters. "Chewie. Gemmer. Let's go! We have to get in the cavern and recharge these things before all those spears are gone!" The three raced for the cave opening while the other Rebels bravely continued to battle the beast.

Suddenly there was a shrill cry! Leia spun around. There was Plif caught up in one of the monster's waving tentacles!

Leia aimed the only working blaster. "Put that Hoojib down! "The shot hit the Slivilith squarely. Plif dropped unharmed.

"Thank you, Leia. I owe you one."

The angry Slivilith turned and swooped at Leia. The Princess dashed into the cavern. "I hope Chewie's still in here or I'm sunk!"

She headed for an outcropping of rock as the horrible monster roared into the cave after her. Then Leia tripped and fell helpless before the beast.

Suddenly, from behind a rock, Chewbacca leaped up. The giant Wookiee grabbed the beast, halting it in mid-flight. Using the Slivilith's great size against it, Chewie slammed the monster into a wall of razor-sharp energy crystals.

An eerie sound, like shattering glass, echoed through the cavern as the Slivilith tumbled helplessly down the tunnel that led to the fiery core of the planet.

Cheering Rebels and Hoojibs rushed into the cave as Chewbacca gave a victory roar!

Then the Rebels grew silent as they took their first look at the overwhelming power and beauty of the cavern. The energy crystals glowed with unnatural light. Gemmer whistled softly. "This is perfect. The Empire would never find us here."

Plif cleared his throat. "May I remind you, sir, this is OUR home."

Leia smiled sadly. "Plif's right. The Empire has taken away our homes. We won't do the same to the Hoojibs."

The disappointed Rebel troops nodded their agreement. "You're right, Princess. Come on, team. Let's get on with our mission. Sorry, Plif. Guess we got carried away."

The Hoojibs sadly watched the Rebels turn to leave. Finally Plif spoke up. "Friendship

is what makes a home really a home. And you're welcome to share our home with us."

Leia beamed. "Plif, I think I love you."

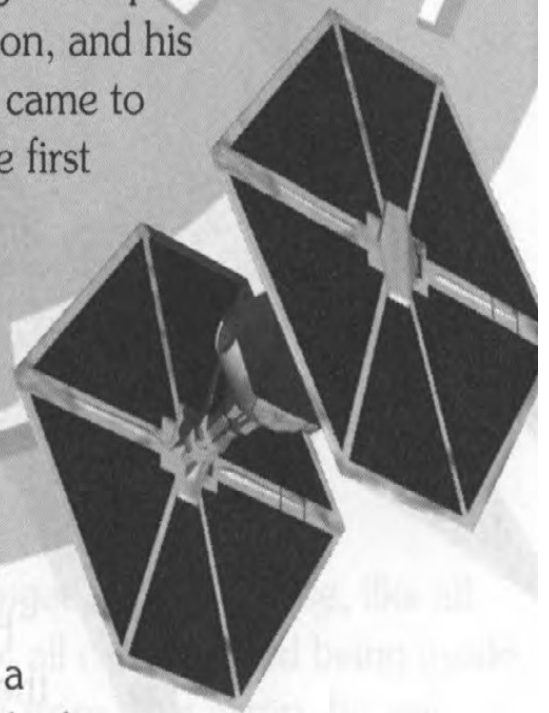
After recharging the radio, Leia sent the news to the wailing Rebel fleet. "Our recon reports were correct \227 location perfect, unlimited energy supply, and total seclusion. But we found something very important that was not in the reports \227 we found friends!"

TIE Fighter

Part One

"Ten Hut!" The officer barked the order and Maarek Steele pulled back his shoulders and squared his chest. The officer pinned a medal onto Maarek's uniform, gave a salute—right hand against left breast—which Maarek returned, then swiveled as if on gimbals, striding off to pin another pilot. Maarek avoided thinking of Mordon, and his thoughts wandered. Ultimately a familiar image came to mind. It was the Star Destroyer *Vengeance*. The first time he had seen it, the Star Destroyer had seemed the symbol of a new life, and of the power and grandeur of the Empire. How different it all looked now. But then. . .

Perhaps a month had passed since the incident with the Bordali. He was still a civilian, working in the Repairs section of the Star Destroyer. It was his first shakedown flight, a chance to take a repaired TIE fighter on a test run "outside." He had



been learning the controls from the veterans in Repairs, and they liked him enough to give him a turn in the cockpit. In combat, the TIE fighters were ejected through an automated system, but in Repairs, they had to guide the craft through the hangar on repulsorlifts, then out the airlock on engine power. The fidgety repulsors on most TIE fighters made this maneuver difficult at best, but Maarek quite enjoyed the challenge. It reminded him of his early days racing swoops.



That first moment in the dark stillness of space, Maarek gasped and his head reeled. Stretching off beyond sight and into the richness of his imagination, the galaxy spread out before him. To either side was a vast metal world. Though he had been aware that the *Vengeance* was an Imperial Star Destroyer, his mind had never reconciled its vastness with the idea of a space ship. Now, he felt compressed—a mote, a mere particle—and even the Star Destroyer, grand as it was, seemed momentarily bounded by its limited scope.

Soon the incomprehensibility of seeing space from the inside of a tiny starfighter forced Maarek to turn his attention reluctantly to something closer at hand—the *Vengeance*. It was then that the real immensity of the Star Destroyer reasserted itself in his mind.

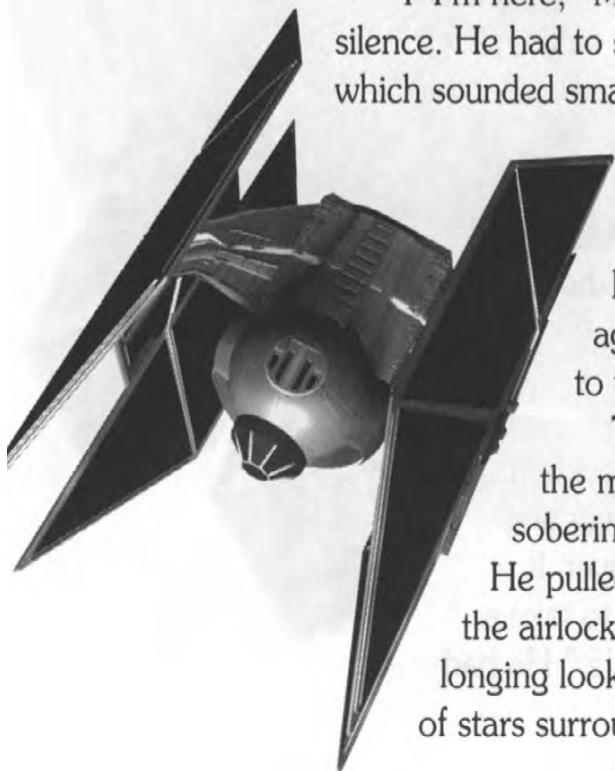
“This is Margoet. Stele? You there?”

The crackly voice blared in his ear, reproaching his almost spiritual awe.

“I- I’m here,” Maarek replied after a moment of silence. He had to search for and finally activate his voice, which sounded small and distant.

“First time’s a bit of a shocker, eh?” Margoet’s voice was affable. “Sorry to cut you short, but the old tub’s hyperspace warning came on a moment ago. Better come back in. It’s a long ride to the nearest planetary base.”

The thought of being stranded here in the middle of nothing at all was instantly sobering. Maarek snapped to full awareness. He pulled the T/F around and headed back to the airlock, but not without taking one last, longing look at the Star Destroyer and the tapestry of stars surrounding it.



If he had seen little of the outside of the Star Destroyer in his first month, he didn't get to see much of the inside of the huge ship, either. Most of it was restricted to military personnel, and whole sections were classified. What he had seen—the civilian barracks and supply centers, the repair hangars, and a few offices in Admin—had all reinforced the image that he was stationed on a military installation planetside. Only the fact that he had been told he was aboard a ship contradicted that impression, and he often had doubts that he was being told the truth.

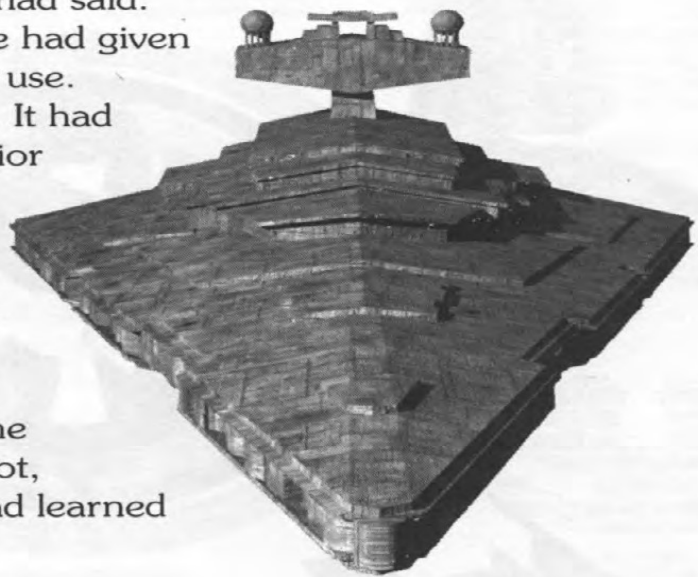
For he had become aware that the Imperials were in many ways a haughty bunch, full of their own righteousness and superiority. He was sure they would not hesitate to tell a civilian conscript like himself any lie that furthered their own ends. Except for Admiral Mordon. Now there was an enigma. Mordon, the senior officer aboard the *Vengeance*, was in some ways the most human. He had obviously taken a liking to Maarek. But of course, that had come later, after Maarek had come to his aid during the Rebel attack.

"Come see me any time," he had said.

"My door is always open." And he had given Maarek the strangest password to use.

There's a fog over Celadon City. It had struck Maarek as odd that the senior officer aboard so great a ship should bother with a lowly pilot, but in a short time, Maarek became a sort of surrogate son to the admiral, or so it seemed.

And here he was, receiving another medal for his service to the Empire. He had become a top pilot, fought in many battles. And he had learned that all is not as it seems.



Maarek began his pilot's training aboard the *Vengeance*. Of course, like all new pilot trainees, he had a lot to learn, and not all of it involved being inside the cockpit of a starfighter. On his first day back from boot camp, he was handed several holos and told to be sure he was familiar with them. Once he had found his new quarters in the pilot's wing of the great Star Destroyer, Maarek had popped in the holo. He studied it until his eyes grew heavy and he slept dreamlessly.

Part Two



"You cadet Steele?" A pair of troopers stood near the simulator.

"I'm Steele," Maarek acknowledged.

"Come with us," the first trooper said.

Puzzled, Maarek followed as the two troopers led him out of the simulator complex, through the concourse, and into one of the main tunnels aboard the Star Destroyer. There, they motioned him to board a skimmer — one of the small hovercarts that were often used to cover the large distances within the Star Destroyer, especially when speed was important. At just around 1600 meters in length, going from one end of the Star Destroyer to the other could take time, and many of the pathways through the ship were anything but straight!

Maarek kept his silence, as did the troopers, but he wondered why his training had been interrupted. Had he done something wrong? Even though he was now a legitimate member of the Imperial Navy, he retained some uneasiness about his presence aboard the Star Destroyer and his place within the Empire. Had they found some defect in his character, or discovered some secret he didn't know he had?

They rode up several floors on a large elevator, and soon it became apparent that they were heading toward the bridge. Maarek had never been on the bridge of the *Vengeance*. Few non-bridge personnel were ever invited there, and Maarek saw no reason why he should be an exception.

He did not see the bridge this time, either. They turned off the main tunnel, then wound around through several other tunnels, ending up in a small hallway that stretched off into the distance. The troopers halted the hovercart and climbed down.

"This way," said the one that talked. The other remained silent, but his eyes were watchful.

They led Maarek to a plain hatch. It had no markings, and was indistinguishable from many similar hatches in hallways all over the ship. Maarek had no idea how they even knew this was the right one.

The hatch irised open and the troopers motioned Maarek to enter. His heart skipped a beat. What awaited him inside? It was mysterious.

Inside, he was assaulted by the color green. There were plants everywhere. There was also a pleasant, though unfamiliar scent. It smelled vaguely like the shimsa flower from Maarek's home planet, Kuan, but there was another scent mixed in — like pepper or benthe berry tea. The air was thick, and Maarek realized that it was very humid. From somewhere, Maarek heard the sound of running water. It was as if he stood on a planet somewhere, not in the middle of the metal hulk of a Star Destroyer.

Amid the greenery, Maarek began to notice the brightly colored flowers, ranging from vivid pink to dusky orange. A few were tinged with lavender or aquamarine. They were thick, almost fleshy, and seemed to shiver in the dampness. Maarek noticed that each flower he observed was pointed directly at him. He was about to move to investigate one of the flowers when Mordon spoke.

"Do you like my little retreat?" the admiral asked. With a start, Maarek realized that the admiral was standing close by, partially camouflaged by a great green bush almost twice his height.

Before Maarek could answer, the admiral continued. "Come, cadet Steele, join me for a few moments." He beckoned Maarek to follow him and walked back into the . . . jungle was the only appropriate word.

Maarek followed hesitantly. He noticed that the flowers remained facing him, even when he moved. So fascinated was he with the flowers that he failed to notice the small waterfall and the table and chairs nearby until he had nearly stumbled into one of the chairs.

"Have a seat," said Mordon with a slight chuckle.

Off balance, Maarek did as he was told and plopped ungracefully into the chair. He felt foolish, but was too overwhelmed to care. How could such a natural garden exist on the Star Destroyer? It seemed somehow out of place in the Imperial scheme of things.

As if in answer, Mordon said, "Most Star Destroyer admirals have their . . . eccentricities. Some collect artifacts, some have elaborate holo units designed to simulate whatever they desire to experience. For me, I grew up on a planet full of natural beauty. I come here to think, to find my own brand of solitude."

Finally, Maarek found his voice. "It's beautiful, sir."

Mordon laughed. "And you're probably wondering why I had you brought here," he stated.

Once again, this was the foremost thought in Maarek's mind. He nodded. "Sir?"

The admiral reached over and poured a steaming liquid into two cups and gestured for Maarek to take one. As Maarek tasted the biting liquid, Mordon sat quietly, his eyes closed and his breathing very even. When he began to speak again, his voice was slow and seemed slightly distant. "Let's say you remind me of someone. Also, you did me a favor once, and I'd like to repay it. Or maybe I want something more from you." Mordon's eyes opened slightly.

Instantly Maarek was suspicious and he felt himself grow very still. The steaming cup burned his hand, but he remained frozen in place. What did it mean when an admiral wanted a favor of a raw cadet?

But Mordon either didn't notice Maarek's sudden wariness, or he chose to ignore it. "I am a very good judge of character, Steele. Can I call you Maarek?" He didn't pause for an answer, but continued as if the question required none. "I think you have certain qualities that I want to encourage. . ." He closed his eyes again and there was silence other than the sound of water splashing on rock.

Maarek waited, noticing that the flowers were still pointed directly at him. Only at him, not at the admiral.

Suddenly, Mordon seemed to come alive again. "So, Maarek, how are you doing in the simulators? Your reports are excellent."

Slightly startled, Maarek answered without thinking. "Simulators are fine, I guess, sir. But not like the real thing."

Mordon smiled. "Of course not. But you must be patient. What you learn there may preserve your life."

"Yes, sir." Everyone said the same thing.

"And how do you like your new role as a citizen and soldier of the Empire?" Mordon asked.

After weeks of silence and keeping his own counsel, Maarek surprised himself by answering honestly. "I've seen very little so far. The Empire is as good as any political system, I suppose. Bringing order and prosperity to the galaxy and all. But I don't know. Anyway, what really interests me is finding out what happened to my father." As soon as he blurted it out, he wished he hadn't said anything.

But Mordon only said, "Ah, the scientist. . ."

Maarek sat uncomfortably for a moment, feeling acutely observed. Then Mordon spoke again. His voice was low. If Maarek hadn't known better, he would have called it conspiratorial.

"There are some things you cannot talk about with the people around you, but it is necessary to tell someone," he stated. "All is not as it seems within the Empire, cadet Stele. There are mysteries and events seen dimly in the fog." The mood passed suddenly. "Finish your tea, Maarek, and come see me again soon." The admiral stood up, and started to leave. Casually, he handed Maarek a small ring — a simple band with an oval-shaped disk of metal on the top. "Wear this until you get outside. Then give it to the troopers. Don't put it down!"

The stern warning confused Maarek, but the admiral was already leaving and he had no chance to ask why not. He quickly finished his drink and made his way back to the hatch and the bleak, but familiar metal halls of the Star Destroyer.

The sound of running water, so rare aboard the Star Destroyer, came to be the symbol of those times Maarek spent with Mordon. There was sometimes food — delicacies from worlds Maarek had never even heard of. Always, there was the spicy tea. And always, there was conversation.

Mordon heard Maarek's whole story, about the war with Bordal, the disappearance of his father, his swoop victories (and losses). He found it easy to talk amid the greenery and the water sounds and the tea. It was a relief.

Conversation was not one-sided, however. Mordon talked often about his past. He described the planet of his origins ("It was one of the Corellian systems.") and the exceptional flora and fauna of his homeland.

"Yes, these flowers are somewhat unusual," he said one day. "I grew them from seeds I had flown from my home system. They are keyed to me. As long as I am in the room, they will not attack."

"Attack?" Maarek looked around, noticed, as always, that every flower he could see was turned toward him. "What do you mean, attack?"

For once, Mordon did not laugh at his obvious discomfort. "They can exude a powerful poison, killing a human almost instantly. But don't worry. You're safe as long as I am here."

"But what about when you're not here? I've been here alone, too."

"Yes. Do you remember the ring I gave you to wear? It will tell the flowers you are a friend. Without that, you would be dead in seconds."

Maarek said nothing, twisted the ring on his finger, and squirmed in his seat. Suddenly he missed the barracks and his cold, hard bunk.

"You are quite safe, Maarek. My flowers do not make mistakes. They know friend from foe."

The admiral often told Maarek stories of his early years as a cadet or of being a pilot in old freighters and transports.

"By the time I entered the Imperial Academy, I had already captained a small Corellian transport. I always believed that I was meant to explore other worlds. I never knew how much I would miss mine, though."

Maarek never tired of hearing stories about space combat, and Mordon frequently offered advice about starfighter tactics and combat survival. "Keep your head on a swivel," he would say. "Don't let anything catch you unaware. Your single advantage is situational awareness."

Another of his favorites was, "Don't forget the wingman."

But by far his favorite advice was, "Don't be a hero." He would often elaborate. "Pick your moments and learn to recognize situations that will get you killed. It's all right to miss a kill if it means you'll survive to fight another day."

Some of Mordon's advice went contrary to what he was being taught, but Maarek always knew which information would keep him alive. And that was what counted.

Later, Maarek consolidated some of Mordon's most practical tips:



At one meeting with Mordon, Maarek was sipping his tea when the admiral, who had been silent for several minutes, finally spoke again. "Have you seen the Secret Order?" he asked.

Maarek spilled some tea. "I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

Mordon smiled his most mysterious grin and asked, "You've occasionally seen men dressed in robes, have you not?"

"Oh, yes," answered Maarek. "The acolytes."

"The what?" Mordon asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

"At least that's what the other cadets call them," Maarek answered sheepishly.

The admiral laughed and sipped his tea. "I advise you to speak to them. They can be useful to you. And I think they prefer to be known as envoys — envoys of the Emperor."

"But who are they?" Maarek asked a little suspiciously.

"They are members of an elite corps who look after the Emperor's business. They can be helpful, and will offer you opportunities . . ." Mordon left the word "opportunities" hanging in the air between them. Then he added, "Don't be afraid to approach them before missions. They already know you. They are watching you."

Maarek felt a shudder run up and down his spine. "They seem quite unapproachable," he said after a moment.

"Nevertheless, you will want to speak with them," Mordon repeated.

Several days later, they sat beside the waterfall, staring into the bubbling froth at its base. Neither had spoken for several minutes, and Maarek's mind had wandered back home, to Kuan. He was just wondering how his mother was doing when the admiral spoke, his voice distant, worried.

"Things are getting worse," he said, then lapsed into silence again. When he spoke again, his voice was stronger and more present. "I have been studying some of the communications on the Imperial comlink and, well, let's just say I have people who tell me things . . ." He was still staring at the base of the waterfall. He had not looked at Maarek. Now he looked up and captured Maarek's eyes with his. "I'm convinced that the greatest immediate danger to the Empire may not be the Rebel Alliance. There's treachery in the air."

Maarek kept silent, not sure he wanted to hear this. But he could not look away. Despite himself, he was fascinated.

"Some high ranking officers in the Imperial Navy, I'm afraid, may have some plans of their own. The information I have is only partial. I can't name any names yet. But soon, I'll have the information I seek."

"Excuse me, sir," Maarek interrupted, momentarily breaking the admiral's spell.

"But why are you telling me this? Surely I can't be of any use to you."

The admiral turned slowly and studied Maarek. "You might be surprised," he said. "Yes, you might be surprised."



Maarek was in his quarters, reading a performance analysis of his simulation training, and he realized that he had no idea what it said. He looked around. His head ached. He must have fallen asleep reading. Everything was familiar. Nothing out of place. Except one very small package on his holodesk. He picked it up and opened it slowly, still not fully connected to his senses. Mordon's ring.

Seeing the ring reminded him of the events of the past few days:

News of Mordon's death had hit the *Vengeance* like a hammer. Everybody was flattened, but none so completely as Maarek. He had completed his simulation training and was awaiting final confirmation of his acceptance to active duty. He hadn't heard from Mordon for several cycles and was beginning to wonder why.

The official pronouncement followed on the heels of the shipboard rumors. Mordon, it was announced, had died of "natural causes" and was succeeded by (Acting) Admiral Coross.

The Empire sent military investigators to the ship and for several days, they interviewed and interrogated crewmembers. They called it "standard procedure," but when Maarek's turn had come, as it inevitably did, he wondered at some of the questions they asked.

"Did the admiral give you anything? Any holo documents? Any unusual objects?"

Maarek had known better than to lie to these people. He took the small metal ring off his finger and handed it to one of the men. There were two of them, and they were both stern, serious, by-the-book types.

While the two men examined the small ring, Maarek tried to calm his breathing. From the moment he had entered the small room, he had felt a tightness in his chest and a sense of dread.

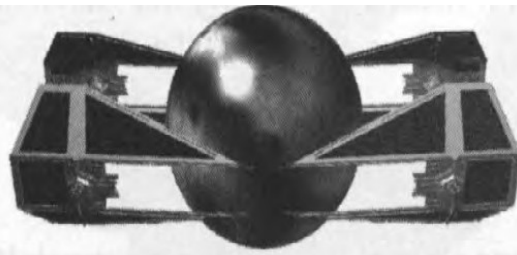
The first man spoke. "We'll keep this for now, cadet."

"May I have it back, sir?" Maarek had asked.

The second man spoke then. They did this. Alternating sometimes, as if they shared the same brain or something. "I don't know," answered the second man.

The interrogation had lasted for several hours. They made Maarek repeat everything Mordon had told him. He spoke candidly, afraid to do otherwise. He could tell that the two men were disdainful of his relationship with the admiral, perhaps even a bit suspicious. Finally, they required him to drink a caustic liquid. After that, he felt strange — observed himself talking, but not really getting the sense of what he said.

And the next thing he knew, he was in his quarters reading, but not understanding, his performance analysis as if nothing had happened.



It was several days later that the turmoil caused by Mordon's death died down, the investigators shipped out, and routine once again set in. Maarek was awaiting his first assignment as a pilot. He had little to do, and spent most of his time with other pilots or at the simulators. When the message came through, he almost missed it. He hadn't checked on the link for several days — didn't use it much. Mostly found general announcements or studied historical texts when he had nothing else to do.

This message was different. It said:

Cadet Maarek Steele

Imperial Star Destroyer *Vengeance*

Origin: Kuan.Taroon.Stele

My Dearest Maarek,

I have missed you. I hope you are well. Please write. I hope to meet you in Celadon City.

All My Love,

The message was signed, Mother.

Maarek knew it was a phony from the first words. His mother, in her entire life, had never, and would never call him "My Dearest Maarek." Moreover, he had never planned to meet her in Celadon City. She would not have written "All My Love." Finally, she would not sign her name "Mother." She would have signed it "Marina." In fact, there was nothing right about this message at all.

Intrigued, and a little frightened, Maarek looked at the message file itself. From the size of it, there should have been much more information. But he couldn't figure out how to examine the file. It was locked and only the fake message would appear when he attempted to get inside.

After several minutes of fruitless attempts, Maarek gave up. He was about to head back to the simulators when it came to him. Celadon City. That wasn't something he and his mother shared.

With a rush, he didn't know whether it was fear or excitement, he ran back to the holodeck. He located the message file and then keyed in the password. "There's a fog over Celadon City." It had been his private code. This had to be from Mordon!

"Stele:

I am getting very close to the source of the treachery. Soon I will have the names of the traitors. But the enemies of the Empire also have their spies. I feel danger aboard the *Vengeance*. I am issuing orders to remove you from the ship. You will be sent to a remote outpost. There you may be safe. Eventually, you will be reassigned.

If you get this message, it means something may have happened to me. Do your job. You will be contacted. You have exceptional gifts. Remember, don't take chances.

Your friend,
M"

Maarek read the message several times. He was struck by the irony of Mordon's last line. No chances, indeed. When he had gleaned every nuance from the words on the screen, he punched the purge button and the screen blanked out, leaving only the Imperial logo. It was risky to have any unrestricted message, and Maarek knew it could be traced. But aboard the Star Destroyer, nobody really had the time to check every message.

He thought for a long time about Mordon. Anxious, he went to the simulators and flew some training missions. He always felt better when he was in the cockpit of a starfighter.

Part Three

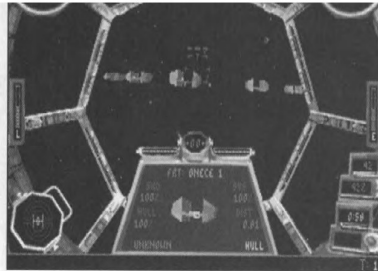
The Rebel base at Hoth had been routed, a major victory for the Empire. Word of success had even reached out to this remote outpost — Platform D-34! When Mordon had written in his message that he was removing Maarek from danger, he hadn't been kidding. This place was dull, boring, and tedious.

The platform itself guarded a major trade route in the Javin sector. Maarek drew shifts every day, flying patrol and inspecting cargo craft that were detained by the Imperial customs agents. It had been exceedingly dull, but now there was a definite buzz in the air.

He walked down the narrow hallway toward the launch pad, his boots making hollow thuds against the metal deck. He almost collided with one of the platform crew coming in from an adjoining hall. The man was a "local," one of the kind who pulled long duty on the platform — staying there for a year or more. The man nodded in Maarek's direction. Most of the locals were standoffish about pilots, who rarely stayed long, but this one was attempting to be friendly. Maarek had no time to chat, though. The buzzer was sounding. There were incoming ships.

As dull as it was inspecting cargo containers and freighters, it was better than sitting around on the platform. At least he'd be back in the cockpit. He was glad there was some action, however insignificant.

There were two unidentified transports and five freighters jumping into the inspection area. Both were requesting permission to pass through this area. The freighters were closer to me, but the transports were moving much faster, so I decided to inspect the transports first.



Approaching the freighters.

All the freighters had foodstuff in their holds. All of them, that is, until I came to freighter Onece 3. This one was carrying Rebel fugitives. Probably from the Hoth battle, I thought.

"There are Rebels on that one," I called over the comlink, then continued with my mission and finished inspecting all the freighters. I got an acknowledgment from base that I had completed the main mission.

Somewhere in there, the message came across that the freighter with the contraband had been captured. Good.

TRN *Sigma* brought in the Rebel fugitives and Maarek was at the launch pad when they were escorted in. There were ten of them, shuffling along in shackles. An escort of blaster-carrying stormtroopers led them into the interior of the platform. Maarek shrugged. It brought back memories of being a Bordali prisoner, but he figured it served the Rebels right. He headed for the small area the pilots called home. It wasn't much — nothing like the suite of rooms dedicated to pilots aboard the Star Destroyer, but there he might find some other pilots to regale with his story.



Meanwhile, elsewhere on PLT D-34, the prisoners were escorted into a single cell in the brig. There, they were removed, one at a time, and taken to the hastily rigged interrogation room. Major Thorbo, senior officer aboard the platform, was joined by Admiral Flanken, who commanded the Star Destroyer *Hammer*.

"Your position is hopeless," Thorbo would begin. "You will never escape, and your petty Rebellion will be crushed like the empty shell that it is."

Inevitably, the prisoner would resist, giving only his name and rank within the Rebellion as military code required. But that would never be the end of it. In the corner of the room was a strange looking droid, which floated above the ground. There were various instruments protruding from its flexible arms.

Flanken would speak, then. "We truly mean you no harm, my friend. There is only the matter of your base location and current plans. We need only know a few facts, then you can return to join the others." Of course, they never joined the others, but that was a necessary lie.

After a while, during which the same basic conversation would take place, Admiral Flanken would point to the droid in the corner of the room. "Do you know what that is, my friend?" He always called them "my friend."

Some recognized the droid or knew its purpose; a shudder would pass through them, and Flanken would smile. The others, the ones who had never seen such a droid, would look defiantly as if they did not care.

"That unlikely looking droid is called an interrogation droid. It is quite adept at its job. It is impossible to resist, and can cause quite a bit of pain, I am told. It would be a shame to have to use it. This could all be quite pleasant."

"Stop wasting time," Thorbo would interject. "Let's use the thing and get it over with. I rather look forward to seeing this defiant fool cut down to size."

And so it would go. Some prisoners, particularly the Mugaabi sympathizers, who were more mercenaries than true believers in the Rebellion, would talk freely, giving what details they knew. Of course, they knew little, and inevitably the droid was used to wring out every gram of what they had inside.

Others, the true Rebels, were more resistant, but the result was the same. In the end, none could resist the droid, and the Imperial interrogators learned some useful information.



Maarek was getting bored again. He had been spending a lot of time in the simulators, which were of an older type than those aboard the *Vengeance*, and so were less realistic. There were a few other pilots aboard the platform, but none of them were in a very good mood. It wasn't a place where the up-and-coming pilots were stationed, and Maarek, after a little time spent with the others, thought he knew why these particular pilots had been placed where they were. He was not sure he belonged here, however, and itched to get a chance to prove his worth as he had aboard the *Vengeance*. His next opportunity came soon enough, when the Rebels launched a sneak attack on the platform.

But before that attack came, he was approached by a man in a robe reminiscent of the one the Emperor himself wore. The man approached quietly and stood for a second before saying, in a deep, quiet voice, "Stele." It was not a question, but a statement.

Maarek was instantly on edge. His battle reflexes took over and he tensed his body against an expected attack. But the strange man only said, "We have been watching you. Have you not been advised to come see us?"

"Yes," Maarek answered carefully. In fact, Mordon had insisted that he approach these strange people, but he had avoided doing so. Even in his boredom he always found something else to do. "Yes, I was told to see you, but I don't see why . . ."

"Don't ask questions without reason," the man intoned. His voice was monotonous, but strangely compelling. Maarek fell silent. "If you serve us, you serve the Emperor directly. Does that not please you?"

Maarek nodded.

“Good. Then know that you have been chosen to be a member of a very secret society. I am one of the keepers of its principles. But there are many soldiers, and you will be one. Before you go into battle, always check with one of us, and we will provide you with additional tasks. Succeed in them, and you will earn a very rare and special reward.”

Maarek listened. As audacious as these claims were, Maarek knew them to be true. All of them. He was caught in a web of intrigue about which he knew nothing at all. But he knew he was caught — like a tauntaun from the recently vacated ice world of Hoth when the wampa ice creature had it cornered — he knew there was no escape.

“I will do as you ask. But am I to know nothing more?”

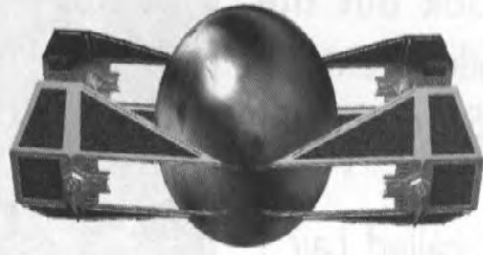
From within the darkness of the hood, Maarek glimpsed the suspicion of a smile. Or perhaps it was nothing more than a trick of light. Whatever it was, it was instantly gone, and might never have been there at all.

“More will be revealed. In time. If you serve us well, you will know all you need to know.” The man turned to go, and Maarek barely heard his last words. “If you survive.”

Back on the *Hammer*, Flanken met with his advisors. He stood on the bridge, the bustle of Star Destroyer operations around him. He liked to discuss strategy amid all the activity going on.

“I think we’ll let the Rebel attack proceed with minimal resistance, just in case it’s a feint or they’re testing the situation. We’ll withhold the *Hammer* until they are fully committed. Then we’ll hit them with all our power. It should be a short battle, don’t you think?”

Nobody disagreed.



He was never so happy in his life as when he found out he was being transferred to the Frigate. After weeks on the isolated outpost, Maarek was relieved to be reassigned. He was shuttled up to the *Fogger* the day after the attack on the platform and given a bunk in the pilot's quarters toward the rear of the ship.

The Frigate was a strange looking craft, something improbable at best. It hardly looked like a warship with its strangely stacked decks and long, thin body. Though nowhere near as large as a Star Destroyer, the Frigate did have many people on board, including some fellow pilots.

The first pilot Maarek encountered was called Grommet. Maarek eventually learned that he was a flight officer named Carith, but he had earned the name Grommet somewhere, and it remained his name to all.

Grommet was a first-rate pilot, but a bit of a character outside the cockpit. When Maarek first encountered him, he was standing outside the officer's

mess and howling like a beast. A couple of other pilots were nearby. They ran for cover as the hatch leading into the mess slid open.

Of course Maarek was caught by surprise, and when the officer looked out the door, he saw nobody else. "What's going on here?" the officer asked.

Maarek saluted and answered, "I just arrived, sir. I think there might have been an animal loose on the deck. I heard a noise . . ."

"Animal? Nonsense." The officer seemed to notice Maarek for the first time. "Say. You're new, aren't you. What's your name, cadet?"

"Stele, sir. Cadet Maarek Stele."

"Stele, is it? Well, Stele. I'll have no animals aboard my ship." The man stood a little straighter and stared into Maarek's eyes. "And I'll be watching you."

"Yes, sir," Maarek answered, standing a little straighter himself.

The officer retreated into the mess and all of a sudden a cascade of giggles and guffaws exploded into the hallway.

The man who had made the animal sounds ran up to Maarek and took his hand. He spoke nonstop, as if he couldn't contain his enthusiasm. Maarek liked him on sight. "Good man, hey. Glad to meet you, Stele. Quick thinking, that. I'm Carith, but everyone calls me Grommet? You the new pilot?"

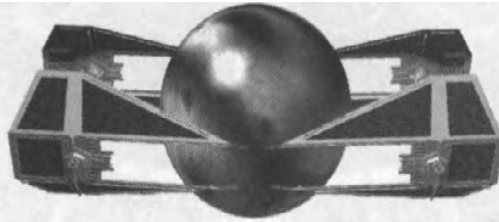
Maarek nodded, but before he could speak, Grommet continued his onslaught. "This here's Alimet and the tall one is Kechel." He pointed to his companions. Alimet was about Maarek's height, dark hair, almost black, and shaggy eyebrows. He looked as if he had just come in from a very dark place. His eyes were constantly blinking and shifting. Maarek wondered what kind of pilot he could be. He was to find out later.

Kechel was tall for a pilot. He probably just made it under the maximum height requirements. He stood, shoulders forward and head craning as if he had a hard time hearing. His hair was reddish brown and his lips were thin. Maarek glanced at Kechel's hands, which were long, thin, and looked slightly deformed. He had half expected the pilots he met to look like clones of the ones he had met previously aboard the *Vengeance* — tall, straight, military, efficient. This motley lot . . . They were like characters from a holodrama.

Meanwhile, Grommet had begun talking again. "It takes a while to get used to us," he said, obviously aware of Maarek's reactions. "But the fact is, so many pilots come and go. Somehow, we just keep on going. I'm up for a promotion soon." Grommet smiled and puffed out his chest comically. "You'll have to call me Flight Lieutenant Grommet." He laughed, and Maarek found the laughter contagious. He realized suddenly how little of it he had heard in recent months. This might not be so bad after all.

"Where's my manners?" Grommet suddenly exclaimed. "You'd probably like a tour, wouldn't you. Of course you would." Before Maarek could answer, Grommet had turned down the hallway. "Come on. We'll show you around." Maarek followed.

Over the next few days, Maarek spent a lot of time with Grommet and his friends. On the next mission, Grommet and Alimet were Maarek's wingmen.



"I nearly got burned by that new craft," Alimet was saying.

"You mean the escort shuttle?" Maarek asked. He was biting down on some unrecognizable stew. The food aboard the Frigate was probably a technological marvel, but it did little for the eye or the palate.

"Yeah," continued Alimet. "I didn't realize it could fire to the rear."

"I just hung back and fired some missiles," Maarek offered, choking down his last lump of brown stuff.

Grommet laughed. "Well, now we know. Missiles, it is."

"What if you run out of missiles?" asked one of the other pilots, a young, fair complected man called Foocl'd.

"Well," suggested Grommet in mock seriousness, "you could try a head-on attack."

Foocl'd frowned. Clearly a youngster with an arrested sense of humor.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the *Fogger*, Colonel Vistore was in conference with Admiral Flanken via ship-to-ship link.

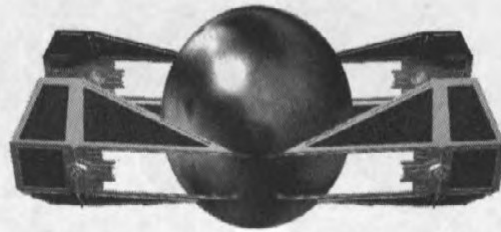
"We've traced their trail to the Bruanii sector," Flanken was saying.

"There's a Mugaari depot there. I want you to send some ships over there and take care of business."

"Right," answered the colonel. "Is it protected?"

"Now how the hell am I supposed to know that?" answered Flanken. "Just send your Gunboats. I'll be sending some as well. We'll commence the attack at fifteen hundred hours. I'll send over the necessary navigation data for your hyperdrive computers. Any other questions?"

"No, sir. We'll be ready," Vistore answered. As soon as the link was dissolved, he wiped his brow with a sleeve, caught himself, and stalked off to his private ready room. The bridge grew very still for a moment. Then all activity resumed.



The man in the robe was talking. He seemed exceptionally pleased. "Yes. This is all the confirmation we have been wanting. We will be able to trace the person responsible for this treason. You have done well, Steele."

Maarek said nothing. He still was uncomfortable around the secret society. He waited for a dismissal. He didn't dare be rude to these men, but he knew that the mission to destroy the *Lulsla* was already starting, and he didn't want to miss the opportunity to be involved.

But the man wasn't finished yet. He had still more orders for Maarek. "You will destroy the *Lulsla*. And when you do, the Rebels will scuttle out of their places where we can get them. Find their leaders for us. The Emperor will be pleased."

Maarek rushed off to battle, a small shiver running up his spine. He would not want to be in the Rebels' place. Not now. Not ever.

Meanwhile, Admiral Harkov flew to a secret rendezvous with Rebel leader, Mon Mothma. There, he offered to defect, and to bring his part of the Imperial fleet with him. As long as the price was right.

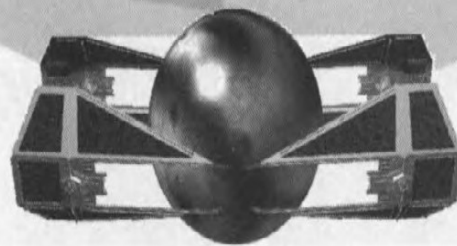
Part Four

His transfer was quite sudden and unexpected. He had been almost comfortable aboard the *Fogger*, and then the orders had come through. Maarek was reassigned to a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, the *Protector*. He was given no warning. One day, shortly after the battle with the *Lulsla*, he was told to pack up and report to the hangar. A transport was leaving in an hour, and he was to be on it.

He said quick good-byes to Grommet and the rest of them. Grommet was still expecting a promotion. Ketcher had his nose stuck in some historical holo and hardly looked up, but Alimet made a big show of hugging Maarek and kissing him on both cheeks, saying, "We will meet again, my friend. We are destined to meet again. Of that I am sure."

Then he was gone. The transport took him to the Star Destroyer, which, while smaller than the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer *Vengeance*, was still a good deal more impressive than the frigate had been.

He had very little time to orient himself. He had just located his bunk when the comlink lit up and he was called to a briefing.



"In just one hour, we will jump into the Sepan sector to quell a long-standing civil war between the peoples of Ripoblus and Dimok." Admiral Harkov stood at the podium. He was thin and looked as if he hadn't had enough sleep recently. He gestured with his hands, pointing randomly about the room. To Maarek, he seemed somewhat erratic, but he was the admiral after all, and everyone was listening intently. Maarek wondered if the admiral normally conducted briefings himself, as it was somewhat unusual for the commander of a Star Destroyer to do so.

The admiral's voice was strong, and carried all the authority of his station. But to Maarek's ear, it was edgy, and had an unpleasant twang about it. It might be an unfamiliar accent, Maarek thought, but I don't much care for it.

"We want to remind you," the admiral continued, "that this is a peace mission. Our objective is to come to the aid of a small Ripoblus convoy. This is not a mop-up mission. You must deliver a telling blow to the Dimok aggressors, but allow some to escape to tell their superiors of the might and will of the Empire. Are there any questions?"

"How do we tell which of them to let escape?" asked one of the senior pilots. "Draw straws?"

There was general laughter in the room, but the admiral did not join in. He glared at the speaker a moment, then said, "If there are no real questions, then, you all have work to do." He was about to step off the podium, when he stopped and said, "Captain Trace. I want a word with you."

The pilot who had made the joke stood up and walked slowly toward the admiral. Maarek was on his way out of the briefing room, but just as he left, he observed the admiral raise his hand and slap the captain hard across the face. There were some angry words that Maarek could not quite make out, then he was out the hatch and could see no more.

On schedule, an hour later the *Protector* jumped to Sepan and immediately the Imperial forces mobilized to catch the Dimoks in the act.



Maarek wasn't sure what it was. Certainly, there was something bothering him aboard the *Protector*, something gnawing at him. It took him a day or two to identify it. Morale. The crew and other pilots he met here were not happy. The ship was run very strictly, and security was tighter than he had ever seen.

Right after the mission to drive off the Dimoks, Maarek was ordered to report to one of the briefing rooms. On his way there, he happened to get lost, and came to a door that led to another part of the ship. Two navy troopers stood at the door with blaster rifles held ready across their chests. They came to attention as Maarek approached.

"This area's restricted. No admittance without a proper pass."

"Sorry," said Maarek. "I was looking for Briefing Room 14f on deck 20."

The first guard looked suspiciously at Maarek while, out of the corner of his eye, Maarek noticed that the other guard shifted his rifle ever so slightly.

"This is deck 19," he said gruffly. He took out a small recording device. "State your name and rank," he ordered.

Puzzled, Maarek complied.

The guard seemed satisfied then. He put the recorder away and ordered Maarek to go about his business.

He found his way to Briefing Room 14f without further incident, but he felt somber and suddenly tired. Perhaps that's why he said what he did.

Here's how it happened. He sat down in a seat in the briefing room. It was empty. He waited perhaps ten minutes. Then an officer appeared. It was Captain Trace, the one whom Harkov had slapped.

The captain walked quickly into the room and pressed a button near the podium. A small table began rising from the floor. The table had two modular chairs attached to it, and the whole apparatus slowly appeared with a high whining sound and a loud click when it had completely emerged. Then Trace motioned for Maarek to come sit, saying, "You're Steele, I believe. Welcome to the VSD *Protector*."

Maarek walked slowly to the strange little table and sat in one of the seats. The captain sat in the other chair so they faced one another.

"Yes, I'm Steele, sir. Is there something wrong?" He'd only been on the ship for a day, and already he was being called in to a special meeting. That most often meant a reprimand, or something worse.

But Trace smiled. It wasn't a big smile. Just a breath of humor on his otherwise stern visage. "Nothing wrong, no, nothing wrong." He said it as if he were trying to convince himself, or at least that was Maarek's impression.

But the captain wasn't finished. "No, I'm just here to indoctrinate you to life aboard the *Protector*." He sounded quite bored.

"Yes, sir," Maarek answered. "I'd appreciate that."

"Would you?" Trace looked a little surprised.

"Well. It does seem a little different here," Maarek answered.

"I've watched your performance in the mission we just completed," the captain said, scratching behind his ear. Then he rubbed his temples with thumb and middle finger, bending his head slightly forward to do so. "You're an able pilot, Stele. You know your way around the cockpit; I'll give you that. But you also went beyond your orders. Why did you do that?"

Instantly, Maarek was wary. What did he say? Did he admit to performing extra tasks for the men in robes? He prevaricated. "I thought it would be helpful, sir. I hope I did nothing wrong . . ."

The captain interrupted him. "Around here, Stele, things are done by the book. We don't do more or less than we're asked. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. I will attempt to do my duty, sir."

"Good. You are to stay within your assigned area of the ship. No wandering, exploring, getting lost . . ." He emphasized this last condition. So he had already been informed of Maarek's encounter with the guard. ". . . or asking unnecessary questions. Are we clear?"

Now this is where Maarek's being tired made him say what he would certainly have held in under normal circumstances. "Is that why you asked that strange question at the briefing?" he asked before he knew he'd said it.

Trace's first reaction was to stiffen. Clearly he was about to rebuke Maarek, but suddenly he laughed and slapped the table quite hard. Maarek tried to push away from the table, but his chair was attached.

"You're an insolent little pup," Trace said when he had caught his breath. Under control again, he added, "Or a damned fool. I'll be watching to see which. Better watch what you say around here, though, Stele. Humor isn't encouraged. You're dismissed."

"Thank you, sir," Maarek said, already getting out of his chair.

He was halfway across the room when the captain said in a modulated voice, "A word of advice: Don't let the admiral notice you. You'll be better off that way."

At the time, Maarek had no way of knowing how prophetic a statement that was.



“Just what did you think you were doing out there?” The captain was clearly angry. He was pacing back and forth, looming over Maarek, who was sitting at the strange little table in the briefing room again. “Didn’t I tell you to follow orders and do what you’re told?”

Maarek said nothing. He held his hands, palms together, making a little tent of his fingers, and pointed them subtly in the captain’s direction. It was an old gesture from Kuan, his home planet. It was used to ward off conflict.

Captain Trace visibly calmed himself and continued in a more reasonable tone. “I suppose congratulations are in order. You did help us identify and capture something or someone important. I don’t know what it is, but senior command seemed happy enough.”

Maarek shifted in his seat, but said nothing.

“A word of advice, Steele. Don’t be a hero. Just do your job and keep out of trouble.” The captain leaned on the table and looked Maarek in the eyes. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to punish you or congratulate you.”

Maarek smiled at that. “Sir, I know my actions seem undisciplined. I guess I’m just inquisitive by nature.”

Trace mulled over this statement for moment. “I think there’s a proverb about curiosity killing some creature.”

“On Kuan, we say, ‘Curiosity killed the rondat . . .’” Maarek offered.

“Don’t be a rondat, then,” the captain said, finally. “OK. Get out of here. You’re dismissed.”

. . . and satisfaction brought him back, thought Maarek as he left the room.



Harkov sat behind a large desk. The visitor stood. Angrily, Harkov held up a small holo disk, saying, "This is unacceptable. Go tell your masters that it's pay in advance. Tell them also that they had better keep their mouths shut tight. I think someone's getting suspicious."

The other man nodded and took the holo disk from the admiral's outstretched hand. "You must understand, admiral, that we are at war with Ripoblus. We must have those arms. . ."

Harkov interrupted. "And you will have them. But not before I receive payment in full." The admiral got slowly out of his seat and leaned forward on his desk. "I'm sure the leaders of Ripoblus would be happy to pay in advance for Imperial weapons."

"From what we've seen, they already have a supplier," the other man answered bitterly. "You Imperials think you can do whatever you want. You may be surprised at what happens," the man added.

Harkov's eyes narrowed slightly, but otherwise he betrayed no reaction to the man's statement. "Just see that I get what's due. And don't waste your breath threatening me," he added casually, as if it were a mere annoyance. "There's nothing you or your government can do. Now get out of here."



Elsewhere, Maarek was awakened by a muted hiss — the sound of his doorway opening. It was dark. Only the soft glow of the comlink ready light cast any illumination in the small cabin. Maarek could sense the presence of another in the room, though he heard and saw nothing.

"Stele." The voice was low and insistent.

"Wha— What is it? Who are you?" He scanned the room, his eyes as wide as they could go, trying to make out who was there.

"The Emperor needs your assistance," the voice said again. The tone was sepulchral. Maarek felt his scalp tighten. Something wasn't right.

"I don't know who you are," he said. He reached for the light.

"Do not turn on the light," the voice insisted, but Maarek ignored it. He punched the button by his bunk and the room became bright.

They both blinked a moment as their eyes became accustomed to the sudden illumination. When he could speak again, Maarek said, "Captain Trace."

The captain looked chagrined. "I must have made a mistake."

"What in the world did you think you were doing," Maarek asked. He was shaking, not sure whether he wanted to throttle the man or laugh out loud.

The captain shook his head. "I was sure you were working for the Secret Order. I saw you speaking to one of them before."

Maarek studied the man. He had suspected from the beginning that there was something unusual about him. "Why does that interest you, Captain?" Maarek asked.

Trace scrutinized the bleary-eyed Maarek closely for a moment, clearly considering speaking. Then he shook his head, obviously thinking better of saying anything more. "This meeting never happened," he said.

Maarek nodded. "Whatever you say, Captain," he replied.

After Captain Trace had gone, Maarek lay awake for hours, thinking about the captain, the Order, Harkov, Mordon . . . And when he slept, his dreams were confused and full of strange images. Through it all, the Emperor loomed, his voice filling Maarek, not for the first time, nor the last. "You are mine . . ."



"Can you imagine? Using their own children as hostages. These people are savages!" The admiral was clearly furious.

The man on the other end of the priority comlink channel sounded unimpressed. "I'm more concerned with these discrepancies in the supply manifests, Admiral Harkov. As you well know, I've been assigned to investigate possible misappropriations."

"Surely, even a man in your somewhat dull position can appreciate that there are bigger and more significant events in the galaxy than a few lost parts," Harkov said, his voice condescending.

But the man on the other end of the link continued in the same matter-of-fact voice. "We're not talking about a few parts, Admiral. We're talking about weapons."

"Yes, yes. I know," said the admiral, sounding impatient. "I'm far too busy to deal with this. Take it up with my quartermaster in supply section."

"I already ha—" the man began, but Harkov cut the link.



Maarek did not see Captain Trace anywhere that next day. He was in the mess with a few other pilots, having a bland meal. He had been up early on a routine inspection shift, and he was tired. He was listening with only half his attention, still puzzled by the events of the night before.

He heard someone say, ". . . new type of starfighter. That's what I heard."

He looked around. It was a pilot called Shreet. Maarek didn't know him well. In fact, he hadn't had time to get to know anyone very well yet, but

Shreet had a reputation as a gossip and rumor monger. Maarek was tempted to ignore the man, but something in his tone made him listen.

"That's right. It's supposed to be a faster starfighter, like a TIE fighter, but with shields and hyperspace and rocket launchers."

"Oh, come on, Shreet. That's ridiculous," one of the other pilots said.

Shreet looked defensive at being challenged. "Well, it's something like that," he said.

"Well, they'll never let you fly one, anyway," one of the pilots chided, and Shreet glared at him.

This launched the group into a heated discussion about who was the best pilot and who had saved whom during various battles. Maarek quickly lost interest in the banter and got up to return to his cabin.

He was about halfway there when one of the Order's robed figures detached himself from a small alcove and walked up to him.

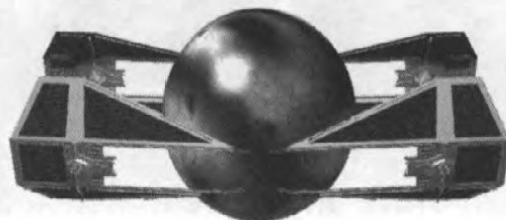
"The Emperor needs you," he began.

Maarek stopped still and tried to peer under the man's hood.

"I'm sorry? What did you say?"

The man stood silent a moment. Then he continued as if Maarek had not said a thing. "You will soon be on a mission to protect a valuable shipment. Be alert. We require you to investigate any unknown shuttles. We suspect that there is more to this civil war than we had suspected. Someone is supplying Imperial weapons to both sides, and the Emperor wants to find out who is behind it."

By this time, Maarek was sure this man was genuine. "I will do my best," he said. The man in the robe turned and left. Maarek continued to his cabin wondering the whole time why he couldn't just be a pilot, fly starfighters, and stay out of other people's business.



When the battle was over, one of the robed men approached Maarek as he headed back to his quarters.

"You have done well, Steele," the man said. "Due to your efforts on the part of the Emperor, a member of the Rebel Alliance was discovered aboard the SHU *Omlaut*. This is significant."

"My I ask how so?" Maarek asked.

"You have earned the right to know. Your loyalty has been noted, and you will be invited to receive a special award tonight." Maarek felt his stomach turn over. What kind of award did the Order present? But the man was still speaking. "In answer to your question, we have noticed that the Rebel was taken immediately to Harkov's private ready room. He has been alone with the prisoner since then."

"I don't understand. Perhaps he's interrogating the prisoner," Maarek suggested.

"This is not standard interrogation procedure," answered the man simply, then he added, "In addition, Harkov's ship has continually been plagued with supply shortages. The evidence leads us to believe that Harkov has been falsifying reports to cover his black market schemes, selling weapons to both sides of the Sepan civil war. And the presence of a Rebel leader aboard the shuttle indicates that he is making some arrangements with the Alliance as well."

Maarek hadn't really cared much for Harkov from the beginning, but he was shocked to hear such an accusation made against a senior admiral in the Imperial fleet. Speechless, he simply stared into the darkness of the man's hood where the light occasionally reflected off the man's eyes. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement behind a nearby bulkhead. He just got a quick look, but he recognized the light hair and captain's uniform. Trace!

"There's something I must tell you," he began, but the robed man held up his hand.

"Your captain has been very inquisitive. Do not worry. We will take care of him."

"I don't think he means any harm," Maarek said quickly. "I have a feeling about him."

"Yes," was the answer. "We will deal with him."

And that was the last time Maarek saw Trace aboard the *Protector*.

Later that day, Admiral Harkov addressed the leaders of the Sepan system. He declared their war over and assured them that the Empire would not tolerate any breach of the peace. He promised that peace would bring prosperity and suggested that cooperation could bring full privileges to the worlds of Sepan. There were several among those listening whose expressions betrayed a good deal of disdain, even hatred, and although the word hypocrisy never passed anybody's lips, it was foremost in their thoughts. But nobody interrupted. At another location, far away, a very private meeting took place between a member of the Emperor's Order and another robed man, this one dressed in black, masked and of formidable stature and bearing. His breathing was audible, as if assisted by some apparatus hidden beneath his robes.

Lord Darth Vader, the Emperor's chief vassal, listened to the Order's suspicions about Harkov. He stood straight and still, and stared steadily ahead through the eyeholes of his strange mask. When he spoke, his voice was deep and eerily resonant.

"Get me the evidence," Vader told the man. "Then we will deal with Admiral Harkov."

Part Five

"The Pakuuni system is a hotbed of pirate activity." The Emperor's envoy was droning on. Thrawn thought him boring, but listened politely, his mind wandering to a particularly interesting sculpture he had recently received — reputedly from the old world of Berchest. His strange red eyes narrowed as the man before him spoke. Occasionally he would nod or grunt some reply to these assertions, but finally Thrawn could take no more of the man's incessant posturing.

"Thank you for your generous assessment of the Pakuuni situation," he said. "Please inform the Emperor that I will take the necessary steps to bring order to that area and make the trade lanes safe from illegal activities."

The envoy, to his credit, could tell when he was being dismissed. He gave a salute, turned, and walked off, but not before Thrawn noticed that familiar disdain which pure humans often worked so hard to hide from him. He had worked harder than any officer, proving himself again and again, until now he commanded a Star Destroyer. But even now his nonhuman status forced him to take on operations beneath his abilities. Someday . . .

This mission to Pakuuni was an insignificant task. But the Emperor still required more proof of Vice Admiral Thrawn's abilities and loyalty.

He would coordinate the clean up of the area first, then build a lasting Imperial presence which would ensure that the pirates would stay away. Those who survived. The vice admiral placed his hand on the comlink button, his blue lips drawing back into a satisfied but feral-looking smile. He would even have time to work with his art collection during this operation.



Maarek was transferred again, this time to the FRG *Ludwick*. The reason for the transfer was a total mystery, but he suspected it had something to do with the Secret Order wanting to get him away from Harkov.

Aboard the *Ludwick*, he received a pleasant surprise. He had just settled into his new cabin — he was getting quite proficient now at finding his way through new starships and getting settled. He knew the layout of a frigate pretty well, and was headed for the pilot's lounge. He heard a familiar sound echoing through the hallway, and he increased his pace. It was the sound of a wild animal, and he had heard it only once before — again aboard a Frigate.

"Grommet," he called. "You maladjusted sack of gravel worms. Are you making trouble again?"

Sure enough, just ahead was his friend flanked by the inevitable duo of Alimet and Ketcher. Grommet was looking up in surprise, his body leaning one way and his face the other, clearly caught in the act. Then he smiled broadly, put his finger to his lips, and motioned for Maarek to follow.

This time, Maarek managed to get down the hallway and out of sight before the commanding officer, a Commander Buckeye, came out to investigate.

They ran back to the pilot's lounge and there sat laughing and breathing hard for a minute before Maarek asked, "What in a thousand worlds is that sound, anyway, Grommet?"

"Oh. It's just the sound of the Sand People from an obscure planet called Tatooine. I was once stationed there and happened to get lost out on the desert. I heard that sound once, and it nearly paralyzed me. I only caught a glimpse of the creatures who made it. My landspeeder was heading back to base before I realized I was in it. I tell you, it was an experience."

Maarek frowned. "That still doesn't explain why you keep howling in the hallways of various frigates."

Grommet smiled. "You ask a lot of questions, Maarek. How about we show you the sights?"

"Fine. Hey, do you know what kind of operations this ship is performing? I've just come back from an interplanetary war. It was a real mess."

Almet spoke up. "I think we're going to go up against some pirates," he said brightly.

"Pirates, huh?" The thought of pirates thrilled him just as it did with almost every other kid in the galaxy. After all, who hadn't once dreamt of a life as a ruthless space pirate with all the riches, women, and adventure a man could want? But those were childhood dreams. Putting aside the visions, Maarek got back to reality in a hurry. "That should be interesting. Do you think they know what they're doing in a cockpit?"

Even Ketcher looked up at this question. But it was Grommet who answered. "That's the thing about pirates. You never know. But I figure they won't have the latest equipment. We'll take care of them."

Everyone agreed it was going to be an interesting operation. But first, they were sent to Argoon to help in the investigation of a recently abandoned manufacturing plant.



There wasn't much to do aboard the *Ludwick*. For the first few days, Maarek and his friends took turns telling battle stories. They had all survived a lot of close calls, and Alimet had even lost a ship. He recounted his rescue as if it were one of the greatest miracles of all time, and everyone agreed that he had been awfully lucky.

Grommet had received his promotion at last. He was now a lieutenant, but the new rank seemed to have done nothing to settle him down. A few days after the mission at Argoon, Grommet suggested they go down to the hangar and see if they could take any ships out. "We'll say we're on training maneuvers," he said with a grin.

Of course Maarek and the others told him it wouldn't work, but he had it in his head that they needed something to do, and flying simulators wasn't enough.

They headed quickly to the hangar, which was close by. As the doorway to the main hangar opened, they could just see an Imperial shuttle settling down onto the landing pad. There were special guards at the entrance, blocking the way.

"State your business?" demanded one of the guards.

"What do you think?" answered Grommet, adopting a tone of studied nonchalance. "We're pilots. This is the hangar. We're on maneuvers."

The guard seemed somewhat satisfied with the answer, but he asked, "Do you have orders to be here?"

"Of course," answered Grommet. "From Commander Buckeye," he lied.

The guard eyed Grommet suspiciously. "It was the commander himself who told us to detain anybody coming onto the hangar. There's an important visitor."

But Grommet was too far committed to back down now. "Obviously, the commander did not mean us. Now let us through so we can go on about our business."

During this whole exchange, Maarek kept wanting to interrupt, but couldn't think of anything to say. He was ready to run or to gag Grommet — something, anything to avoid watching this idiotic stunt reach its inevitable, and tragic, conclusion. So, when the guard said, "All right. You may pass," he almost fell over. It had worked! Now, if the commander never found out . . .

They entered the hangar and quickly walked over to a row of TIE Bombers. The original plan had been to take some starfighters out for fun, but now the intrigue of the arriving shuttle had snared them. They hid behind the TIE Bombers and watched as a strange-looking being walked down the ramp from the shuttle, flanked by stormtroopers.

The visitor was clearly not human, but he was in the uniform of a Vice Admiral of the Imperial Navy. In his short time serving the Empire, Maarek had learned how rare it was to find any aliens in the navy, let alone at such a high rank. The man's skin was blue, and his eyes appeared to be quite red.

His hair was blue/black and looked thick and stiff. His uniform was impeccably neat, without a crease showing, and Maarek found himself wondering if this strange creature had stood the whole time he was inside the shuttle.

Standing near the newly-arrived craft was Commander Buckeye. The two saluted and stood talking for a few moments. Maarek, whose hearing was quite exceptional for a human, could make out most of what they were discussing.

"... difficult times. A commander who does a very good job could do very well," said the blue-skinned alien.

"Yes, Admiral Thrawn," agreed Buckeye. "There are always opportunities."

"You will be heading for Pakuuni to help set up an Imperial presence there. Do you understand your task?" The admiral's voice was deep, underscored with the inevitable ring of authority. Maarek had rarely heard anything like it. Something about Thrawn reminded him of Mordon, though there was no obvious connection between the two.

Buckeye was recounting the tactical plan to the admiral, who was beginning to look impatiently around the hangar. For just an instant, his eyes brushed by the place where Maarek and his friends were hiding. A rush of fear enveloped Maarek in the instant those red eyes seemed to focus their intensity on him. But if Thrawn had seen them, he made no indication. He simply listened until Commander Buckeye was finished, then said, "Good. See that your troops do the job. There will be no failure in this operation. It is good to see you again, Commander. I want you to begin immediately. I will hold the *Stalwart* ready when you have need of her."

Then the admiral turned and, followed by his stormtroopers, he headed up the ramp and back into the Imperial shuttle. Commander Buckeye stepped back and gave an order. Then he left the hangar as the shuttle rose on its repulsorlifts and floated toward the hangar bay, and from there out into the vacuum.

"Looks like we're on the move again," said Grommet.

"Right," said Alimet. "I guess we should get ready for a jump."

Maarek looked around at the various starfighters around the hangar. Suddenly everything looked different. There was something about Thrawn, an aura of power that Maarek still felt in his bones. He followed his friends in a daze. Everything seemed new. Even the colors aboard the Frigate were more vibrant. Something inside him had changed, though he couldn't imagine what it was.



"When are you ever going to learn to keep your mouth closed?" asked Alimet grumpily, as he dragged the remains of a sentry droid into the growing pile of metal and slag on the hover platform.

Grommet was pulling apart a blasted-out control panel, with Maarek on the other end. "It's a small price to pay, I'd say," he answered calmly, grunting as he pulled.

"All the same," Maarek offered, "I think we got off easy. It could have been a lot worse."

They were down on the pirate's base, helping tear it apart in preparation for the arrival of the new Imperial base equipment. As it turned out, the guards had informed Commander Buckeye about the matter of four pilots who had sneaked into the hangar during his meeting with Thrawn, but the commander had been too busy to deal with them until after the first Pakuuni mission was over. He had little trouble identifying which pilots were involved, however, and punished them by putting them on this clean-up duty, a real slap in the face. Ordinarily, Imperial pilots would not be required to perform such menial duties, especially if they did not involve flight operations or the maintenance of their own areas of the home base.

But Maarek was right about one thing. The punishment could have been worse. Much worse. Fortunately, Commander Buckeye was a good leader and he realized that these transgressors were four of his best pilots. In the mission at Argoon, they had all performed well, and against the pirates, they had been very effective, even helping to discover some hidden Rebels among the cargo containers.

In reality, this wasn't at all a punishment. Oh, they had to work hard, but it got them off the Frigate and for pilots on extended duty aboard Imperial ships, the most difficult times were those between missions when there was almost nothing to do. As the four friends poked around amid the destruction of the pirate base, they were able to escape the inevitable post-mission boredom.

Not that there was anything of any value left. Either taken by fleeing pirates, appropriated by the initial inspection crews, or blasted to slag, all that remained of the base were fragments of the odd droid or small transport, plus various remnants of storage areas and control rooms.

That's why it was so remarkable when Ketcher, who had been working off by himself nearby, came running over, ducking under the twisted wreckage of a hatchway, to show them what he had discovered.

"What is it?" asked Grommet, reaching for the small, shiny crystal in Ketcher's large hand. But Ketcher drew his hand back.

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm keepin' it."

"You'll get in trouble, you know," said Alimet. "They told us to hand over anything unusual. That looks like something valuable."

"Right," said Ketcher. "And I'm keepin' it." Then, before anyone could stop him, he put the small crystal in his mouth and swallowed it.

Maarek had a bad feeling about this development. "You sure you want to do that?" he asked, too late.

Ketcher normally said little. "Guess it don't matter now," was his reply.

They fell silent, each lost in his own private world of thought, and returned to their labors. The discovery of a mysterious, unknown crystal represented something different to each of them. For Maarek, at any rate, this glowing gemstone represented something dangerous, with a power of its own, though he supposed to the others it simply represented something of immense value, or perhaps, an object of surpassing beauty. And then there was the thrill of keeping something back — a small moment of personal triumph over the system. But they weren't supposed to be thinking that way. Were they?

Soon after, they were called back to the ship. The convoy was about to arrive.



The construction of the new space station proceeded quickly, and Maarek spent much of his free time watching the heavy lifters and tugs move equipment. It was like a complex dance conducted on a very large scale. The lifters would hover over the large containers and drag out huge sections of a wall, or a crate of equipment larger than a starfighter. In the weightlessness of space, these large loads floated effortlessly.

Occasionally there was some excitement. A tug with a particularly wide load might come too close to a lifter and their loads would bump. It all seemed comical, but Maarek could see that these collisions caused great damage to the cargo. Even in space, everything had mass, and when one item hit another, and both massed several tons, the results were generally destructive.

Periodically, Maarek and the other pilots would fly combat space patrol, watching over the construction. At these times, he might have enjoyed an even better view of the construction activity, but he had to remain alert for the sudden appearance of an enemy, not to mention the possibility of a sudden collision of his own. With their hyperspace-capable starfighters, the Rebels could show up anywhere, at any time. And so it was that Maarek found himself in the middle of another battle.



"I'm sorry, Vice Admiral Thrawn. Our TIE fighters and TIE Interceptors are all being repaired and refurbished just now. Can you not delay your inspection?" The speaker, a small adjutant to the *Ludwick*, was practically begging. But Thrawn was impatient. It was time to oversee this new station, to be sure it would serve the Emperor. Some people could trust the opinions of others, but Thrawn was not one of them.

"I will inspect the station today. Please inform Commander Buckeye that I will be arriving in three hours."

Back on the *Ludwick*, the commander was conducting a briefing regarding Thrawn's visit. "We only have TIE Bombers to act as a defensive shield. Security is very tight, but in the event of a sneak attack, we will not have the luxury of speed on our side. The defense of the admiral will depend almost exclusively on TIE Bombers. We will have an ample supply of missiles, however, and you will have an opportunity to reload."

"This is critical. There will be no failure."

The commander referred to a holodisplay readout. "We have also equipped some TIE Bombers with special advanced concussion missiles. These missiles are stronger, faster, and more accurate than conventional models. See that you use them wisely."

On the way from the briefing to the hangar, Grommet was going on about the new advanced missiles.

"I can't wait to send one of these missiles up the throat of some Rebel X-wing. I'll bet they make one dandy fireball."

Maarek laughed. "Let's just hope they don't have anything like 'em to shoot back at us," he said.

"Don't be warped," Grommet told him. "Can't you let a guy have some fun?"

"Sure," answered Maarek. "I just don't like the idea of Rebels with missiles."

"Who does?" Grommet asked.

"Rebels, I suppose," interjected Alimet.

That made them laugh.

"Hey Ketcher," Grommet suddenly asked. "What ever happened to that crystal?"

Ketcher stopped, smiled, and opened his tunic. Underneath it was the red crystal, glowing against his white chest. It was hung on a small wire. Quickly Ketcher closed his shirt, once again hiding the crystal.

"So . . ." began Grommet. He looked thoughtful for a moment. He seemed about to speak, but then shook his head. "Looks good," was all he said, then he turned to continue down the passage leading to the hangar.

Before reaching the hangar, Maarek left his friends, seeking out the Secret Order representative. He received his usual instructions; then he hurried to catch up with the other pilots and launch the mission.



After Thrawn had approved the construction effort, activities aboard the *Ludwick* slowed down. Now it was time to wait for relief forces, and there was little to do. One day, the big excitement was the delivery of the new SPCs, special high-speed system patrol craft designed to watch for enemy incursions and other significant events. They were ungainly looking craft, fat and seemingly festooned at random with antennae and other less familiar devices.

Maarek watched as the SPCs flew out on their first mission. At 150 meters, they were quite noticeable and hardly seemed designed for high-speed maneuvering. Maarek knew they carried a standard crew of four with room for nearly a hundred stormtroopers. If needed, they could be used as an emergency troop transport. They were well shielded, and might even be useful in assault-type situations.

Grommet and Alimet joined Maarek at the observation deck between shifts to watch the activity around the station. Ketcher seemed to keep more and more to himself.

The VSD *Stalwart* stayed nearby during these final phases of the outpost's construction, and there was little danger. Soon, however, word came down that the *Stalwart* was going to leave to escort the relief forces. During that time, the outpost would be far more vulnerable, and the pilots began taking more frequent shifts in the cockpit.



They had seen little of Ketcher in the days past, and Maarek suggested looking in on him. He hadn't been on the active duty list during the last mission, and so hadn't flown.

When they found Ketcher in his quarters, he looked sleepy. Not that he was the energetic type normally, but he appeared listless and barely acknowledged their presence.

"Hey, Ketcher. You all right?" asked Grommet cheerfully.

The tall man looked directly at them, but it was as if he didn't see them. "I'm fine," he said in a distant voice. "What are you doing here?"

Alimet spoke up. "We just came to see if you'd like to play some sabacc or maybe come have a drink?"

Ketcher seemed to brighten at the thought of sabacc. He was a nasty player whose bluffs were impenetrable. "Maybe later," he said after a moment. "I'm feeling a little tired," he added. "Think I'll rest a while."

"What do you suppose is wrong with him?" asked Alimet.

For once, Grommet had no answers. Maarek suggested, "Maybe he has some kind of virus or something." They both looked at him blankly.

"Well," said Maarek defensively, "something's sure the matter with him."



Part Six

As it turned out, Maarek received transfer orders again. This time he was moved to the FRG *Shamus*, under the command of Admiral Zaarin. He didn't have a chance to say good-bye to Ketcher, though he did take his leave once again of Grommet and Alimet. "Take care of Ketcher," he had said as he left, and they assured him they would.

He was about to leave when Alimet asked, "How come you're always being transferred, Maarek? You move around more than any of us."

"Don't know," answered Maarek, but privately he suspected he did know. It was almost certainly the Order that was behind his frequent moves. Starting with Mordon, Maarek knew he had been a pawn in a larger game. They moved him at their whim, so he could do the work they could not do. How many others were there like him, basically doing the Emperor's little jobs, but not knowing a thing about why they were necessary, or what the information they uncovered might mean?

In the end, what he thought didn't matter. He was, for some inexplicable reason, what he was. A tool. And wasn't that what he signed up for when he joined the Imperial Navy? He supposed he should feel especially privileged to perform these extra tasks, never mind how many times the process involved had nearly gotten him killed.

Maarek thought about the Order, the Emperor, Harkov, Trace, and a lot of other subjects on the transport that took him to his new assignment, the FRG *Shamus*.

As usual, he slid silently and easily into the framework of yet another ship, and within hours, he was ready for active duty once again.

He recognized a few of the pilots aboard the *Shamus*. None were friends, but they were familiar enough and they also recognized him; there was no mistaking the buzz of sudden conversation which began when he entered the mess. Nobody greeted him, and he collected some food — not bad by Frigate standards — and went to sit at an empty table. He wasn't feeling sociable, anyway.

Yes, Maarek had begun to gain a reputation — among the other pilots, at least. He suspected that his strange behavior on missions, those actions that often got him in trouble with his superiors, also bothered the other pilots. Add to that the fact that he was rarely punished for his apparent lack of discipline, and he must have seemed doubly strange. He suspected that the Order somehow prevented him from taking the heat when he broke formation or went off seemingly on a mission of his own design.

Of course, he had frequently turned up important information or ID'd the odd Rebel-carrying ship. That was a part of his reputation as well. His promotions had come faster than most. He had to accept that. But more and more when his friends were not around, the other pilots had begun to leave him alone.

He was more than a little surprised, then, when Xeal first approached him.

"You're Steele, aren't you?" the pilot had asked.

"Yes," Maarek had answered, automatically studying the man who stood before him. He was quite young, his face unseamed by the rigors of space combat. You could see it in the eyes. After a dozen missions or so, a pilot gained a certain look in the eyes. Other pilots could see it. Of course, thousands of new pilots never got that look — they didn't live long enough. Despite his youth and apparent lack of experience, the young man seemed quite self-possessed. He had an air about him, something Maarek, mulling over in his mind later, identified as quiet arrogance.

The young pilot endured Maarek's quick appraisal, then asked, "May I sit down?"

"Certainly," Maarek answered, motioning toward a chair. "What's your name, cadet?" he asked.

Without taking his eyes off Maarek, he sat and told him, "I'm Xeal."

"It's good to meet you, Xeal," answered Maarek. "What can I do for you?"

"I want you to teach me how to survive." The eyes never wavered. The young man was completely serious.

To Maarek's credit, he resisted the temptation to laugh — his initial impulse. He had never been asked to teach anyone. It seemed absurd. But then, looking at this earnest young pilot, he realized that the man's life expectancy was depressingly low. Most pilots died in their first real combat. The odds were never very good, but they got better the longer you survived. Veteran pilots, which Maarek had to admit he was now, developed an instinct for survival in the heat of battle. Some of it was knowing how to control your starfighter and how to gain an advantage or watch your back. Some of it was simply the knowledge of when to fight and when to back off. For instance, most pilots had to learn not to try a head-on pass against an enemy starfighter in an unshielded craft; those that tried it often didn't live to learn the lesson.

Moreover, Maarek knew that his own survival odds had increased dramatically under the tutelage of Admiral Mordon, whose experiences had helped fill in the gaps in Maarek's own training. Perhaps this hopeful young man's request was less absurd than he had at first thought. But then, he, Maarek, was hardly a Mordon.

Xeal sat patiently, watching Maarek consider his request. When Maarek finally responded, "I'll be happy to tell you what I know, but it's precious little," a broad smile lit up Xeal's face, and he beamed. "Thank you. You have no idea how happy that makes me," he said.

Just then, Maarek saw through the quiet confidence Xeal exuded and realized that this young man was scared to death.



Admiral Zaarin was checking the convoy schedule. "You're sure you've double checked the security," he asked.

Major Crundha nodded. "Everything has been checked and rechecked, sir."

"You know, Crundha, this technology is going to be a big asset for the Empire. The Emperor will surely reward those who bring it to him."

The major nodded again, knowingly. "Yes, sir. I understand. But what will we do about the Nharwaak? They are balking."

Zaarin picked up a small ceremonial knife from his desk and held it before his face, staring at its sharp tip. Crundha stiffened noticeably. "We will deal with the Nharwaak, Crundha. Just as we will deal with all our enemies." The admiral put the knife down slowly and stood. "It's time to go. We have work to do."

As Zaarin walked toward the door to the bridge, Crundha wiped his brow with the back of his hand, sighed, and followed his master.



"Why do we hate the Rebellion?" Xeval asked as he and Maarek headed for the simulators. Maarek had agreed to work with Xeval, to share his experiences and flight tactics. Truth to tell, Maarek was flattered by the young man's interest. But this question about the Rebellion was completely unexpected.

"They're criminals," Maarek answered a little angrily. "They're trying to disrupt the peace and order of the Empire. Little better than pirates."

"I don't know. I mean, before I joined up, I heard a lot of talk."

"We all heard that talk," Maarek argued. "But that's all it is. I've seen what the Empire stands for. We bring peace to warring worlds. We bring order and prosperity for everyone."

"Some people say we bring tyranny."

Maarek stopped dead in his tracks. "Quiet!," he ordered. "Are you trying to get yourself tossed in the brig . . . or worse?"

Xeval lowered his eyes. "I — It's just that I wonder about whether I really hate them."

"You'll hate them well enough when they start shooting at you," Maarek said, putting both hands on Xeval's shoulders and making him look up. "To the Rebels, you're just a machine to be dismantled. They'd just as soon blast your TIE fighter with their laser cannons as have a good meal. Take it from me, the Rebels are a bloodthirsty lot. It's you or them."

"I guess you're right," said Xeval. "But I sometimes wonder."

That night when he was alone, and not for the first time, Maarek thought about the Rebellion, and he, too, wondered.



Zaarin stood on his private observation deck, Crundha, as always, by his side. He stood staring at the bright stars, momentarily allowing himself to dream, to encompass them within his grasp. Nearby, the small gray planet Mylok IV appeared as if suspended over the backdrop of stars. The three Habeen civilians stood, shifting uncomfortably. Zaarin knew they were there, but he chose to ignore them for the moment and savor his own private thoughts.

Finally, the admiral turned and faced his visitors. He offered an inquisitive look, but said nothing. The leader took Zaarin's look as an invitation to speak, and began, "Admiral, we have . . ."

At about the same time, Zaarin asked, "Now what is it that's so urgent?" The Habeen leader stopped talking instantly, embarrassed. It was a subtle thing, but he had just been forced to accept his inferior position, and, from the controlled expression on his face, he knew it. Zaarin smiled and said, "Hmm?"

The Habeen drew in a deep breath, visibly controlling himself. "I'm sorry, Admiral. We came to tell you that we are worried about the Nharwaak. They have been threatening to . . ." The man hesitated.

"Threatening to what?" asked Zaarin, his voice honeyed.

"Sir. Admiral. It's none of our doing. But they've said they'll sell this technology to the Rebel Alliance if we proceed with our deal with the Empire."

Zaarin looked angry. "They're your partners. You developed this hyperspace drive with them, did you not?"

"Yes, we did, sir. But that doesn't mean . . ."

"Nonsense. You will make sure these Nharwaak understand their place. If they do anything that even looks like collaboration with the enemy, I will crush them." Zaarin made a fist and held it up. "Is that understood?"

"It is understood," the Habeen answered.

When they had left, Zaarin turned to Crundha. "Major, I think it's time to take care of the Nharwaak. Let's get down to business."

It wasn't until after the mission that Maarek learned of the loss of Xeal's ship. Nobody could tell him if Xeal was alive or not. He was told to mind his own business; even when he went to Medical, nobody would tell him anything. Eventually, he checked the casualty list. It was generally posted on the shipboard net, and some pilots checked it after each battle to see who hadn't made it. Maarek had never felt compelled to check the list before. It had been hard enough to see the empty seats in the mess or to realize that the pilots sitting in those seats were different from the ones who had sat there the previous day — new transfers to replace the dead.

But Maarek did check the logs and found no mention of Xeal among the known casualties. That didn't guarantee that he'd been rescued, but offered hope.

Still, he slept poorly that night and was anxious throughout the next few days.



Admiral Zaarin wrote out the orders. There would be a formal rendezvous in the vicinity of Mylok IV. There, he and the Habeen leaders would formalize their technology deal, and the Habeen would be granted full Imperial citizenship.

"Give this to the envoy," Zaarin told Crundha. "We'll meet tomorrow."

"Sir?" asked Major Crundha.

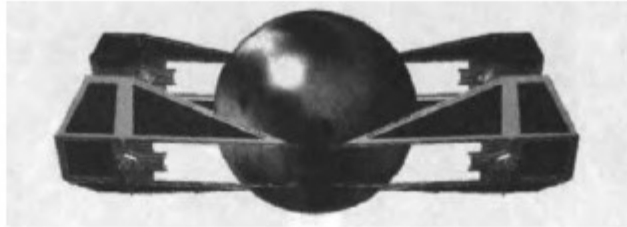
"What? Is there something wrong?"

Crundha shrugged. "Is it really necessary to expose yourself that way?"

Zaarin laughed. "You are too timid, Crundha. That's why you need me. Without me, you'd never amount to much of anything." The admiral got a far-away look. "You have to take chances, my cautious friend. Besides, gestures are important. One must keep up the appearances. Distract them from our true goals. Eh, Crundha?"

"As you wish, sir," the major answered, taking the orders and leaving the room.

After he had gone, Zaarin closed his eyes and made plans for the new technology that would soon be his.



"You have discovered something of possible significance," the robed man was saying. "Some of the technology the Habeen had was of a new type. We will investigate further. Good work, Steele."

"There's something I don't understand," said Maarek.

"And what is that?" came the response, emanating from the darkness within the robe.

"If the Habeen are making a deal with the Empire for new hyperdrive engines, why didn't they make a deal for this new technology as well?"

"That is a good question. Perhaps they did. Perhaps there's something you should know. There is one thing you might want to be aware of," the man continued. "We have learned that the Nharwaak are still dealing with the Rebels. Be prepared. You will be going into battle again."

Later, as he suited up for his next mission, he thought again of Xeval. He had heard nothing. The thought haunted him that he had somehow been responsible for getting Xeval killed. Oh, he had lost wingmen before, but none of them had asked for his advice, and he had offered none. It was the fortune of each pilot to live or die according to his skill and luck. But in Xeval's case, Maarek had taken an uncharacteristic responsibility, and now he regretted it. He was coming to regret everything. He didn't even feel any excitement as he anticipated going up against more Rebel starfighters. There was no longer any joy in killing them. Now it was duty, and duty only.



Maarek received his fourth battle medal in a small ceremony. He wasn't enthusiastic the way he had been the first three times. He simply accepted the medal, thinking back over his short, but intense career. He thought of Mordon and the first time he had seen the Star Destroyer *Vengeance*. His heart was heavy and his mind distracted. So much had changed. Or perhaps nothing much had changed, save he himself. He did know that a persistent naive belief in the perfection of any system would get him nowhere. It was time he looked around himself and got to know why he was here, enmeshed in the intrigues of others, instead of back on Kuan with his mother.



Part 7

Star Destroyers are huge, so huge that it's no surprise that one could be aboard one for days, even weeks, and not see an old friend. So it was that Maarek had been back aboard the *Protector*, Admiral Harkov's flagship, for some time before running into Alimet.

It had all happened suddenly, as usual. He had helped fight off the Rebels aboard the *Shamus* and had received another battle medal. Then an Order member had approached him. (Maarek often wondered how many of these robed men there were. He never saw two together, but it was clear from their voices that he was not always talking to the same man.)

"We are initiating a transfer for you, Stele. It could be dangerous, so I want to warn you to be very careful. You will be sent back to the *Protector*. We are closing in on Admiral Harkov. We want someone there who can operate a starfighter."

Maarek's stomach seemed to turn over and his breathing became shallow. "I would prefer not to have to see Harkov again," he told the robed man.

"Soon, you may have your wish," answered the hood with a small nod which only increased the blackness underneath. "Prepare to move, Stele. Our net is closing, and you'll have the opportunity to bring in the big fish." For the first time, Stele heard what sounded like a chuckle emanate from beneath the robes of an Order member. It was eerie and unpleasant.

"I'll go get ready," he said hurriedly. Then he turned and walked quickly away.

He had spent the first few days aboard the *Protector* keeping quiet and listening to the other pilots talk. But he didn't spot Alimet until the third day.

Or rather, it was Alimet who spotted him. "Stele!"

He turned from the holo he had been studying and saw his friend standing nearby. "Alimet," he called. "Good to see you. How are you?"

Alimet looked thoughtful, and instantly Maarek suspected bad news. "I guess I'm all right. But did you know Ketchel bought it?"

Maarek felt his heart sink. Somehow he had known there was a serious problem. But Alimet's expression suggested there was more to tell. "And Grommet?" he asked with an anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Defected," said Alimet. "He's gone over to the Rebel side."

"What?!? Not possible. What are you talking about?"

"Well, we had a chance to leave the ship," Alimet began. His hands were gripping each other so tightly the knuckles shone like alabaster. "We went to shore one night, and Grommet, he met this woman. I was there, and she was something else. But next thing I know, he's gone off with her. He never came back."

"AWOL," whispered Maarek, almost in awe. "But that doesn't mean he's defected. . ."

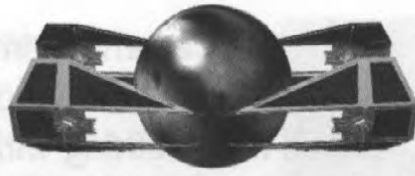
"I saw him once again," said Alimet mournfully. "I managed another touchdown planetside leave. It took some doing — trading favors and such — and I managed to find Grommet. That's when he told me that he was joining the Rebellion." Alimet looked as if he wanted to kick something. His eyes were narrowed, and his face looked tense. He continued through clenched teeth. "I couldn't make any sense of it. I argued with him. Told him not to throw his life away. Nothing I said made any difference. I gathered the woman had something to do with it. Whatever the reason, he was convinced that they were right and the Empire was wrong."

Maarek took a moment to absorb the news. "You know what this means, don't you?" he asked after a long moment during which Alimet stood rock still, practically shaking.

"Yes," said the other. "It means every time we go into battle, we have to worry that we may be shooting at our friend."

There was nothing more to add. They both looked at each other, wishing it weren't so. Finally, Maarek managed to say the only thing he could, "But what are the odds we'll actually see him again at all?"

"Small comfort," Alimet observed. "We either don't see him at all, or we have to kill him."



A few days later, Admiral Harkov was pacing back and forth, hands clasped behind his back, while he engaged in a secret meeting with his closest advisors. He stopped, turned, and faced the great conference table, then leaned forward, balancing his hands on his fingertips. Behind him, an observation window showed nothing but stars. "I have word that a new pilot has joined our crew." His voice was strained. "I'm told he may be a spy for the Emperor."

One of his advisors, a slightly portly man with thinning hair and a mottled scar across his nose and right cheek, shifted almost imperceptibly in his chair. Harkov rounded on the man menacingly.

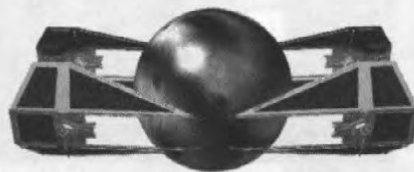
"And you, Vondruln. What have you done about it?" The admiral leaned forward even further, looking like some hunting animal pointing at its prey.

Vondruln's face grew very red, but he met Harkov's gaze directly. "If you will remember, Admiral, it was my office that informed you of this man's identity in the first place. And we have not been idle. There will be an 'accident,' sir."

Harkov looked partially mollified, but didn't let Vondruln off the hook so easily. "You know how delicate the situation is now. A few more days, and . . ." He let the thought hang there. Everyone present was aware of the admiral's plan to defect, and each stood to gain something from its success. "Then I have your assurance that this pilot will be eliminated." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, sir," answered Vondruln. "He will not survive his next mission."

"Good," replied Harkov. "Then we can get on with other pressing business. We must keep up appearances for a little longer. Consequently . . ."



Maarek was on his way to his next mission briefing when a robed man motioned him into a small room near the hangar. It was not their usual meeting place, and Maarek was instantly on guard.

"Steale, I've come to warn you. There is danger for you here."

"I already knew that," Maarek answered, feeling impatient at being reminded of such unpleasant facts.

"The danger is quite immediate," the man insisted. "We do not know exactly what form it will take, but be on guard during your next mission. If you

should run into any trouble, call for reinforcements immediately. Help will arrive. You may yet prove of value to us, and we will not let you perish.”

On his way to the hangar, Maarek was seething with anger. First of all, this mysterious servant of the Emperor had as much as admitted that they would let him die if they didn’t consider him useful any more. Moreover, all of it had been expressed in such overly melodramatic terms that Maarek was left with a sense that he was involved in a cheap holodrama.

His mood became even gloomier when upon his arrival at the hangar, he received orders to clear a minefield while two rookie pilots observed his technique. This bothered him for two reasons. First, he hated minefields. Second, despite himself, he was reminded once again of Xael.

When Maarek looked more closely at the two “rookies” assigned to him, he knew. These were no rookies. Oh, they tried to look innocent enough, but they had that unmistakeable glint in their eyes. No doubt, while he was concentrating on shooting the minefield, one of the “rookies” would make a mistake, and it would be good-bye Steele. This charade was far too transparent to him, but he could see no reasonable option other than to go along with the charade and hope the Order was as good as its word.

It was perhaps the most helpless he had ever felt in his entire life.

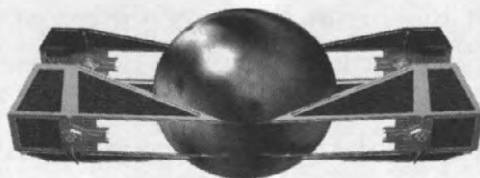
“Escaped? What do you mean he escaped?” Harkov was livid. “Do you know what this means?” he screamed.

“Sir?” squeaked Vondruln, who looked as if he had physically shrunk into his seat.

“It means, you idiot, that they know everything. It means we’re at war with the Empire.” His voice continued to rise in volume and intensity. “And it means we didn’t get anything from the cursed Alliance!”

Harkov’s expression turned cold; there was no other warning. He slowly drew his blaster and, without another word, shot Vondruln in the chest. The uniform burned away and the blaster ate away at the man’s body. There was no blood, as the wound was instantly cauterized. Vondruln’s body slumped forward, his head hitting the table, then slid to the side and fell with a dull thud to the floor.

“Clean up this mess,” Harkov barked at no one in particular. “And the rest of you, get busy!”



Maarek had arrived safely aboard the M/FRG *Osprey*. He was met immediately by a representative of the Order.

“Well done, Stele. You made it. We now have incontrovertible evidence of Harkov’s deception and treachery. He will be brought before Lord Vader and dealt with appropriately.”

But Maarek was still angry from his last meeting with the Order. “You can tell your masters that I’m through doing their bidding. I don’t care how many invisible awards you give me. I’ve had it.”

Maarek started to walk off dramatically, but the robed figure uttered three words which stopped him dead in his tracks. “Harkov murdered Mordon.”

A long moment of silence passed during which Maarek’s anger worked its way into a white rage. But the target was no longer the Order. It was Harkov he hated. His voice was quiet when he finally broke the silence. “What is it you want me to do?” he asked.

“Help us find Harkov,” was the answer.

Events were moving fast now. They had inspected Harkov's supply base, and now they were ready to go after it in force. Maarek was not on the duty roster to go out again, but he insisted; he wasn't going to miss any opportunity to get Harkov. He was back in the cockpit within the hour.

The pace of operations against Harkov had to be unrelenting. They could not give him time to adjust, to plan, or to act. There was just time to witness the arrival of the first squadron of TIE Advanced fighters. Maarek volunteered to pilot one of them. As usual, the Order ordered him to inspect any unknown transports or shuttles, and that's how he discovered Harkov.

Maarek was the one who found the ship with Harkov on board, but nobody came to capture it. He was under orders from the Order not to shoot Harkov. But he wanted revenge for Mordon, wanted so badly to press the stud and watch the lasers burn the *Toten* to molten, twisted wreckage. Only fear of reprisals from the Order prevented him from doing as he wished. He called in the location of the transport, but help did not arrive before the *Toten* had made it to the relative safety of the platform.

"We had not anticipated his going to the platform," the robed figure admitted. It was a minor moment of triumph for Maarek. The Order didn't know everything, after all. "It is fortunate in the long run, however," the man continued. "Now your mission will be to attack the platform, not the *Protector*. Be thankful. You do not want to go up against a Star Destroyer."

The attack on the platform took several hours to plan, but all the while,

probe droids kept watch to be sure Harkov did not escape.

While Maarek awaited his next briefing, he took a moment to visit the hangar; he wanted a closer look at the TIE Advanced fighter he had just flown. It was a wonderful craft — fast, maneuverable, and powerful. Would he get to fly it again soon?

While he was in the hangar, there was a commotion at the flight bridge. Maarek strolled over to investigate.

The flight controller was tracking an unidentified spacecraft. “Unidentified TIE Interceptor. Stand by. Do not approach. Give I.D.”

“Captain Trace. Late of the *Protector*. I’m looking for a way out of this mess, guys. Let me in.”

The flight controller motioned to his assistant. “Activate the tractor beam and tow this joker in,” he said.

“Right,” responded the assistant as he complied. On a viewscreen above the flight control deck, a small starfighter appeared. The assistant controller manipulated a set of controls and a blue beam entrapped the Interceptor.

“I know this guy,” Maarek offered. “He was on Harkov’s ship when I was stationed there.”

The controller glanced in Maarek’s direction. “It’s not my concern, boy. And it’s not yours. Just go on about your business.”

Maarek waited while they drew the Interceptor into the hangar. A contingent of stormtroopers arrived and took the pilot away. Maarek stayed out of sight, and Trace never saw him.

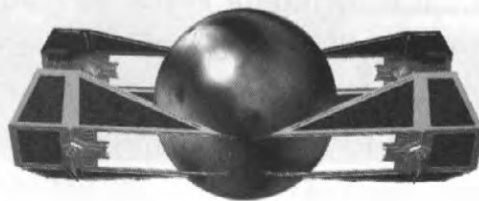
Maarek hurried to find the Order’s representative, not quite sure why he cared.

“They’ve brought in a pilot who might be able to help you,” he told the man breathlessly. “He was on the *Protector*.”

The robed figure nodded. “Your friend, Captain Trace?”

“How did you know?” Maarek asked in amazement.

“Captain Trace is working for us now. We had to get him off the *Protector* immediately. Don’t worry. He’ll be fine. Prepare, instead, for your next mission. We believe an attack on the Rebel platform will flush out our prey. Find Harkov, and we will capture him, this time without fail.”



Harkov was taken to the *Garret* where Lord Vader awaited him. Bitter and defiant to the end, Harkov tried to resist the legendary Jedi powers of the Lord of the Sith, but like so many others before him, he paid the inevitable price.

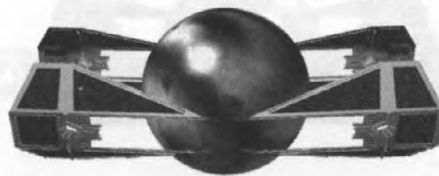
The troopers held Harkov immobilized as the hatch opened with a pneumatic hiss. Lord Vader stood beyond the hatch.

"Welcome, Admiral Harkov," he intoned, in a voice that might have almost been cordial under other circumstances. "We have matters to discuss."

Harkov simply glared.

"Where is the location of your fleet?" Vader demanded.

But still Harkov was silent. Then, the Dark Jedi lifted his hand and pointed it, palm upward, toward the former admiral, who rose in the air as if by magic. Then the man broke completely and began screaming, but his screams were cut short as Vader closed his fist. The sound of crushed bone was the last sound Harkov made as his screams were choked off. His body fell to the ground and Vader walked off, his strange, mechanized breathing the only sound in the room.



Of course, Maarek had no idea of Harkov's ultimate fate. The Order simply told him that he would be punished, and that his crimes were of the most serious sort. Maarek, and everyone else in the Imperial Navy, knew what that meant. So, Harkov was undone, and Mordon's killer brought to justice. Why, then, did Maarek not feel some elation? Why did he feel nothing more than an empty feeling inside?

A few days later, Maarek was resting when someone signalled outside his cabin. He made the door open and admitted his visitor. It was Trace.

"Good to see you again, Steele," he said.

Maarek was wary. What did he really know about this man? "Yes. I suppose so," he answered laconically, then added, "What brings you here?"

"I just wanted to apologize," Trace said, sitting on Maarek's bunk, there being only one chair in the room. "I know I acted strangely before, and I never had a chance to tell you how I felt."

"And how is that?" Maarek replied. "How did you feel?"

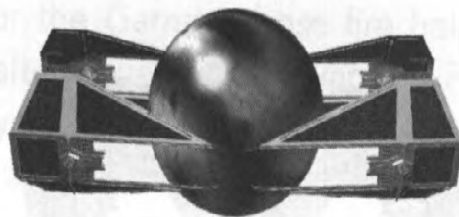
"Look," Trace said a little defensively, "I know you are involved with the Order. They told me so when they recruited me. So, you almost had me fooled at one point, but I knew you weren't entirely what you appeared to be."

"The problem is, Captain," said Maarek, "I'm probably exactly what I appear to be. I'm just a pilot who takes orders."

"Right," agreed Trace. "Anyway, I didn't want to disturb you. I just wanted to let you know I'm a friend. OK?"

"I guess so," answered Maarek. "But my experience with friends hasn't been so good lately," he continued with a wry grin. "Maybe it's better not to push your luck."

The captain grinned back. "I once knew another pilot a lot like you. We were friends. I think I can take the risk."



Admiral Zaarin returned Maarek's salute. "Welcome to my research facility," he said warmly. "I've heard a lot about you, Stele. Your reputation precedes you."

"I'm happy to be here, Admiral. And a little embarrassed that you should bother with me," he told the admiral. "I'm sure anything you've heard is exaggerated."

They stood in a large office aboard the deep space platform where Zaarin's high technology research was taking place. For reasons known only to the Order, Maarek had been transferred to this facility. It was the first time he had been based on an outpost platform since his first assignment on PLT D-34. After the events of the recent past, he no longer dismissed the relative quiet of life on a platform as dull or boring.

Zaarin invited Maarek to join him by the large viewport where they could see the various starfighter models being tested as well as several cargo ships in different phases of loading and unloading.

"They look like impressive starfighters," Maarek commented.

"Oh, those?" Zaarin replied. "Those are only modified versions of the TIE advanced. We have something far more impressive to offer."

"I would like very much to see them," Maarek suggested, but Zaarin only laughed. A short sound.

"I'll bet you would," the admiral said. "But all in good time. All in good time."

As Maarek stared out at the stars and the various craft that floated above the platform, he had the distinct impression that Zaarin was watching him, testing him somehow. The admiral seemed quite friendly, and memories of Mordon flooded in suddenly. Could Zaarin turn out to be a good friend the way Mordon had been? He turned away from the window and looked around the large room.

An oversized desk dominated one end of the office, and next to it stood a stocky man in a major's uniform. The man looked straight ahead and showed no sign of noticing Maarek. But there was a sense of something poised within him, something dangerous, and Maarek suspected that this was not a man to turn your back on.

The desk was almost bare. A few holo disks, and some unusual artifacts were all Maarek could see. He continued his sweep of the room, coming finally to Admiral Zaarin himself. The admiral was almost a head taller than Maarek, and was staring down at Maarek unabashedly.

"You have a very impressive office," Maarek said, feeling awkward and a little out of his depth.

Zaarin continued to stare, an amused smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "Thank you, Stele. Can I call you Maarek?"

"If you wish, sir." Maarek found it increasingly difficult to meet the admiral's frank gaze. He looked back out the window.

"Thank you for coming to see me," Zaarin said, breaking the silence. It sounded like a dismissal. "I hope to have an opportunity to get to know you better. Pilots of your caliber are the foundation of the Empire's strength, don't you think?" he asked casually.

Maarek answered without thinking. "I don't know, Admiral Zaarin. I think the commanders, the ones who decide on policy and plan the tactics, are the backbone of the Empire. Me, I'm just a worker who does his job. Anyway, it's the Emperor who's the real foundation of the Empire, isn't it?"

"Indeed," replied Zaarin. "Indeed. You are quite right. Thank you, Stele. . . Maarek. I look forward to our next meeting."

Maarek left the admiral's office feeling confused. What had just happened? He could swear that some very significant conversation had just taken place in the closing moments of the meeting, but for the life of him, he had no idea what it meant.

Admiral Zaarin sent down orders for Maarek to join him in his private dining room. Two stormtroopers arrived to escort him. He had the strange feeling that one of the stormtroopers was staring fixedly at him, though it was hard to tell. You could never see a stormtrooper's face, after all. Still, it made him edgy. After the situation with Harkov, he knew there could be enemies around any corner. He considered asking Admiral Zaarin for some extra protection, but changed his mind. Still, he kept his distance from the stormtroopers and watched them for any suspicious move.

He made it to Zaarin without incident, and the admiral rose instantly to greet him.

"Ah, Maarek. It is good of you to join me," he said with remarkable humility for a man of such rank. "I had wanted to speak with you more."

Now, when Mordon had befriended him, Maarek had been a raw recruit, and only the fact that he had saved Mordon's life had justified the friendship that eventually developed. But now he was an accomplished and decorated pilot, and Maarek found himself thinking, Why shouldn't the admiral be friendly? After all, in his own way, Maarek had achieved some notoriety, perhaps even a little fame for his role in bringing Harkov to justice.

But it wouldn't do to act arrogant. He knew that. "I am flattered that you find my company enjoyable," Maarek said in his best courtly manner. He almost bowed, having heard that to be the custom among some in the Emperor's circles. But he did not.

Zaarin motioned toward the table, which was set with a variety of unfamiliar, but delicious-looking dishes. "Please share my meager fare," Zaarin said, continuing the mannered dialogue. "It isn't much, but I hope you will find it to your liking."

In all his life, Maarek had never seen such a spread, and he wondered what it had cost the admiral to set a table like this. Surely he didn't eat this way all the time? Maarek could hardly restrain himself. The food looked and smelled that good. At the same time, he couldn't quite shake the fact that there had to be a price to pay. What did Zaarin really want?

It didn't take long to find out. Oh, he was subtle enough. He didn't come right out and say it, but Maarek could read between the lines.

"That business with Harkov was terrible," he said over a bite of five-spiced hoksa steak. "I think he must have been a very disturbed individual."

Maarek nodded, sampling something that closely resembled grass cuttings, but melted in the mouth, leaving a vapor that filled his head with a sweet burning pleasure lasting several seconds, then stopped.

Zaarin watched appreciatively as Maarek momentarily lost himself in the sensation. Then he added, "His punishment was certainly appropriate."

"Whose?" Maarek asked, having a really hard time concentrating on the subject of conversation.

"Harkov, of course," Zaarin replied, gently insistent.

"I think he got off easy," Maarek answered venomously.

"So you believe the Emperor is right?"

It was an odd question, and for a moment, Maarek was distracted from the food. "Right?" he asked. "Right about what?"

Zaarin raised a small crystal goblet to his lips, sipped, and returned it to its place on the table. He picked up his fork, appeared to study it for a moment. Finally he spoke again. "Do you feel that the Emperor is infallible?"

Maarek almost choked. This was almost treasonable, and it was only because Admiral Zaarin was such a high-ranking officer, that Maarek even considered the question. It was commonly acknowledged that Emperor Palpatine was beyond all scrutiny.

"I don't see how I could possibly answer that question," he told Zaarin. "It's not possible for me to know."

That seemed safe enough, and the admiral didn't immediately have him arrested, so he decided he had answered correctly.

"So you approve of the way the Empire is run?"

This had to be some loyalty test, Maarek thought. And the fact was, he had been thinking about these very issues lately. Was Zaarin somehow privy to his innermost thoughts? Was he truly disloyal? There was something about Zaarin that put him on the defensive, but he wanted to trust him. He felt nothing but friendly intentions from the admiral, and he hoped he could be candid.

"To be honest," he told Zaarin, "I think the Empire could do better by uniting all the planets peacefully. I sometimes wonder why the Rebel Alliance is still in existence when we so constantly defeat them in battle."

"So you're saying you have doubts," suggested Zaarin.

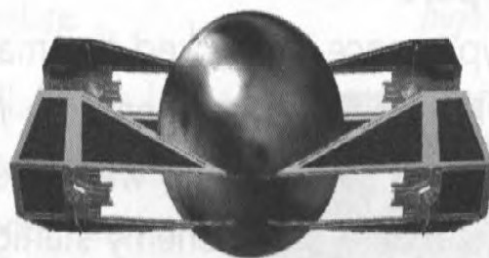
"No," answered Maarek without thinking. "Not doubts, exactly. Just a little confusion." Was there something in the food that made him talk too freely?

To Maarek's immense relief, Zaarin changed the subject just then, and began talking about the new TIE Defender starfighter. During the rest of the meal, Zaarin was affable, congratulating Maarek on his successes and describing the state of the Empire in glowing terms that somewhat belied the questions he had asked previously.

At one point, Zaarin's assistant, Major Crundha, appeared, whispered something to the admiral, and then left. Zaarin stood slowly, wiping his mouth with a silky napkin, and excused himself.

"I'm sorry, Maarek. I must attend to some urgent business. Please stay as long as you like. There's still plenty of food. I hope you have enjoyed our little moment together."

Maarek thanked Zaarin, also rising from the table, but after the admiral was gone, he sat again and continued eating, unable to leave so many delicacies untasted. He also thought about the admiral's questions, and wondered what ulterior motives the man might have.



He was stuffed full of food when the robed man caught up with him.

"You will be going on a mission soon to escort the transfer of TIE Defender prototypes to an escort carrier. Be on the alert. We are concerned that all is not as it seems at this research facility. Do you have any questions?"

Maarek belched rather loudly. He had been about to voice his concerns about Zaarin, but now he was too embarrassed. The Order representative said nothing at all, and Maarek tried to imagine the sour expression the man probably wore beneath his hood. It almost made him laugh. Perhaps he had drunk a little too much Norvanian grog with the admiral, after all.

Maarek met with Admiral Zaarin once more after the convoy had successfully delivered the TIE Defenders. Zaarin was far more serious at this meeting. He invited Maarek to take a seat in his office and sat on the other side of his desk. Major Crundha stood by his right side.

"I've come to the conclusion, Steele, that you are a loyalist," Zaarin began. Maarek said nothing. "I would like to invite you to lead a special squadron under my command. Would that please you?" he asked.

Maarek was taken aback. He hadn't considered such a possibility. He also wondered what the Order would think of this offer. Would they let him accept? "I am flattered," he replied diplomatically.

The admiral smiled. "If I were to give you an opportunity to lead a squadron of the most advanced starfighters in the galaxy, what would you say?"

"I can't think of a better opportunity, Admiral," Maarek told him, "but I wonder if I deserve it."

Zaarin went on as if Maarek hadn't said anything, casually fingering a ceremonial knife. "You would be responsible to me first, of course," he stated. "Could you place your loyalty in me, do you think?"

Maarek didn't stop to think about what Zaarin was asking. "Of course, I am loyal to you, Admiral Zaarin. You are an admiral in the Imperial Navy. There's no question of it," he said.

Maarek was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm. "You will serve me?" Zaarin asked.

"Yes," Maarek said despite himself. "Of course."

"Trace! What are you doing here?" Maarek had been lying down, trying to catch up on his sleep. His meeting with Zaarin had left him drained. He didn't know what he had agreed to, or what exactly had happened between him and the admiral, but he was feeling very agitated and had come to his cabin to be alone, to rest and to think.

The door had announced a visitor — the research facility was full of little technological touches like that — and in walked Trace. Only now he was a major.

"I get around better these days," he answered.

They talked about starfighters and space battles a while — standard pilot stuff about close calls and heroic moments. Then Trace turned serious. He looked around the room as if expecting to see someone else there.

"Maarek, I know you and I have had occasional differences, but I want to ask you a very serious question."

Oh, no, thought Maarek. More questions. But he nodded. "Go on. . ."

Trace was quiet a moment before he spoke. His eyes bored into Maarek's, looking for something. Apparently he found what he was looking for, because he said, "I've been thinking lately about the Empire. And about the Rebellion."

Maarek felt his heart skip. Was this another test? Why was everyone questioning his loyalty all of a sudden? He was tempted to say, "So have I," but he kept silent.

"I mean," continued Trace, "how do we know we serve the side of right?"

Maarek's answer appeared to surprise Trace. "Does it really matter which side we serve?" he asked

"To me it does," Trace countered. "I've been thinking about your friend Grommet. I heard he defected."

Maarek bristled. "That has nothing to do with me." By what right did Trace bring up Grommet's defection? Especially since it had been so much on Maarek's mind of late.

"Still," Trace persisted, "you were friends. What do you suppose could have made him switch sides?"

Maarek decided to be frank. "I've come to the conclusion that loyalty is nothing like what I used to think it was. I think we are loyal either out of fear or out of an expectation of personal gain."

Trace's eyebrows rose. "So you don't think loyalty can be based on ideals or belief in something greater than yourself?"

"I used to," Maarek responded, "but now I wonder."

"Would it surprise you to find out that I am intensely loyal to an ideal?"

"No," answered Maarek slowly. "No, I don't think I would be surprised. The question is, what ideal is it that inspires your loyalty?"

"Yes," agreed Trace. "That is the question."

"And?" Maarek prompted.

"And, if I tell you, I want your promise — no matter what I say — that you will keep it to yourself."

"That's asking a lot," Maarek told him.

"Nevertheless," Trace said.

"All right. You have my promise." Maarek realized suddenly that he was excited. There was something terrible and yet fascinating about this conversation.

Trace didn't hesitate. "My name is not Trace," he declared. "I'm Hamo Blastwell, an officer of the Rebel Alliance."

Maarek's mouth fell open. He looked at the man before him in utter disbelief. Speechless, he waited for something to happen — the roof to fall in, perhaps.

But nothing happened, and Trace/Blastwell shrugged. "I think there's a decency about you, Maarek. You've never been an Imperial clone or butcher. You know what your problem is?"

Maarek still couldn't speak. He just shook his head.

"Your problem is you haven't seen the truth. You've seen what the Empire wants you to see. The Alliance is dedicated to the freedom of all beings, not just the privileged few. The Emperor and his minions are controlled by the Dark Side of the Force. You must come to understand this to grasp the terrible nature of the Empire."

Finally, Maarek found his voice. "Major, I don't know what you are talking about. Only a short time ago, I would have turned you in for what you've just said, promise or not. But I have been confused to the breaking point recently. Everyone somehow wants me. First Mordon, then the Order, the Emperor, Zaarin, and now you and your bloody Rebels. I don't know what Grommet found on your side of the fence, but I'm tired of everyone pulling on me. Now get the hell out, and count yourself lucky that I don't expose you."

Trace/Blastwell turned to leave, a pained expression on his face, which moved Maarek, despite his anger. "Listen, Major," he added, "I will think about everyone's position. I promise. I can't say you're wrong. I can't say you're right. I just don't know. Can you understand that? I don't even know if I believe anything anymore."

The truth is, at that moment, he felt like crying for the first time since his father's abduction. Everything had been so simple. Be wild. Fight. Destroy. Follow orders. Now, nothing made sense, and he was caught with no loyalty to give while everyone demanded it from him. His decision? Do nothing for the moment. Change could only bring disaster.

So he let Trace/Blastwell go. He did not turn the impostor in, but Maarek did avoid further contact with him. He tried to go back to the life he had led, to fly his missions, destroy his enemies, and not think twice about it. Unfortunately, the events of his life did not allow him to keep hiding.

Elsewhere, Admiral Zaarin was studying a recent communique from Imperial High Command on Coruscant.

To Admiral Zaarin:

We have recently discovered treachery within the Corporate Sector. The traitors at Galactic Electronics have been selling their new technology to the Rebels. You have been selected to lead a punitive raid on the main Galactic Electronics research platform. This raid should serve as an example to all who would betray the Empire.

Recover any technology. Take all personnel prisoner. Destroy the base.

Imperial Communique No. 4445W-9940-5Q-4

"Major Crundha," said Zaarin after reading the message, "it's time to return to the *Glory*."

In the aftermath of the raid on Galactic Electronics, there was a flurry of activity aboard Admiral Zaarin's flagship, the *Imperial-class* Star Destroyer *Glory*. Hundreds of prisoners were loaded into various holds and cells. Some were subsequently shipped off to other facilities, but still dozens of them remained. There was a steady

stream of shuttles and transports coming and going from the *Glory*, though there was little for Maarek to do, but watch, listen, and wait for the next assignment.

He was in his cabin again — he had taken to spending more time alone of late — when the someone appeared at the door. When he opened it, a stormtrooper stood on the other side.

Seeing a stormtrooper at the door is not an experience anyone looks forward to, and Maarek was no exception. It generally meant trouble, and Maarek could see no reason to expect anything else.

“Come with me,” the stormtrooper ordered, his voice distorted from within his white helmet.

There was no point in arguing or asking where he was going. Stormtroopers never volunteered information, and would not respond to any but the most basic of requests. Maarek left his cabin and the stormtrooper said, “That way,” pointing in the direction of the *Star Destroyer*’s stern.

The stormtrooper guided him into a little-used area of the ship, which was temporarily functioning as a holding area for prisoners. They came to a small cabin near the holding cells. The stormtrooper told Maarek to enter the room and wait. Maarek did as he was told, sitting down on a small bench that ran along one side of a long table. He waited.

Minutes later, the stormtrooper returned with a prisoner. The older man had a shock of long white hair and was very thin. That’s all Maarek noticed before his face came into view.

“Father!” he cried, clambering to his feet.

The man looked up. His face was etched deeply with lines of worry, and his eyes were downcast and dull. He looked very tired. It seemed to take a moment for those eyes to focus on the Imperial officer before him, to see past the uniform and realize who it was.

“Maarek?” the man asked slowly, belief very slowly penetrating his shock.

“Father, it’s you. It’s really you . . . I had just about given up.”

The man looked confused. “How long has it been?” he asked.

“Months? A year? I don’t even know myself,” Maarek said.

The man stood a moment more, obviously trying to reconcile what to him was an impossible situation. Then he asked, “And your mother? How is she?”

Maarek reached out and hugged his father. “She was fine the last time I saw her. The war’s over,” he added, though it seemed to mean very little anymore.

Maarek suddenly realized that the stormtrooper was still standing at the doorway. Still hanging onto his father, he asked, “Why did you bring him here? And how did you know?”

To Maarek’s complete shock, the stormtrooper began unlatching his helmet. Slowly he raised it over his head. Maarek had never seen a stormtrooper without his helmet — few people had — and he was terrified for a moment before his terror melted into immense relief.

"Pargo! Pargo! I thought I would never see you again, either."

There were tears in his old friend's eyes. "I've seen you from time to time. Heard a lot about your exploits in and out of starfighters," he said. "But I could never talk to you. It's not allowed."

"I've missed you, Pargo. We used to have so much fun in the old swoop says on Kuan. It's not like that anymore," Maarek said sadly.

"No," agreed Pargo. "Nothing is like it was."

Maarek turned back to his father. "There's so much to catch up on. I'm so happy to see you again."

But his father had stiffened. "So I'm correct in assuming that you've become a hot shot pilot for this gang of thieves and bullies?"

Maarek stepped back a pace. "Yes, father. They ended the war with the Bordali. They brought peace to Taroon."

"No doubt, they did. And they brought servitude and discrimination, brutality. Maarek, did you bother to see what effect Imperial rule had on your home world? Didn't you wonder why I didn't return to Kuan? I was taken prisoner by the Bordali, but it was the Imperials I was made to serve." The bitterness in his father's voice was palpable. "Didn't I teach you anything?" he asked at last.

Maarek was crushed. He had lived for this moment. Finding his father had always been his dream. And now . . .

But Pargo interrupted. "I'm sorry, Maarek. I must take him back to the cell. If I don't bring him back soon, they'll know something's wrong."

Maarek knew he was right. There was no way to simply release a prisoner of the Empire. And he didn't want anything to happen to Pargo. "Father. I'm sorry," he said. "I've been so confused. I'll get you out of this." He faced Pargo. "Thank you, my friend. Will I be able to see you from time to time?" he asked.

Pargo looked down. "It's very risky for me to do anything outside my orders. I'll try to see you again, but don't ever come looking for me. I'll find you."

When they had gone, Maarek felt ironically more alone than he had ever felt in his entire life. He went immediately in search of one of the robed men.

"Please," he begged. "I'll do whatever you want. Please let my father go back to Kuan."

"You already do whatever we ask," the Order's envoy replied.

"I have served you," Maarek replied, "unquestioningly. I have done everything that you've asked of me. I will continue to do so if you will free my father. Please. It is all I ask."

"We will consider it," the robed figure told him. "For now, however, prepare to be transferred. Your usefulness aboard the *Glory* has ended. You will be transferred to Darth Vader's flagship, the *Garret*."

"Will I see my father again?" Maarek asked. "I've got so much to explain."

"Perhaps," was the cryptic answer.

X-Wing: Alliance

Clearing The Way

Ace's first official mission as a Rebel pilot was a full assault on an Imperial supply convoy, a support fleet for the Empire's search group hunting stray Rebel craft near the Hoth system. Ace was part of four-craft X-wing group Red, covering Y-wing group Green. The mission was simple enough for even the average human: destroy every enemy vessel in the convoy.

The Imperial Strike cruiser *Scythe* escaped with some damage, but the supply convoy was history. Ace's first real mission, then, was considered a success!

Rescue Uncle Antan

I was thrilled when Emon ordered me to take the *Otana* and pick up Ace at the CRS *Defiance*. For the record, it was not my fault I arrived later than scheduled. I have tolerated the accusations I went on a "joyride" with the *Otana* only because I am programmed to absorb verbal abuse. It is true I have what might be termed a "passion" for flying the *Otana*, but it is not my place to take liberties with it.

Ace appeared pleased to see me, and immediately ordered me to move to the turret position. I did so, and we were off to the hyper buoy. Before long we arrived at the rendezvous point.

Emon was already there in his Firespray, *Andrasta*. He is not the sentimental type, and started right in familiarizing Ace with the plan: The Azzameens long ago had planted a mole at a Viraxo facility; that mole recently brought news that Uncle Antan was being held prisoner and had just been transferred to the Viraxo facility where the mole was stationed.

It was arranged for the mole to manipulate Uncle Antan's move to a cell near the facility's top-most airlock. There, he would be rescued by—*me*, actually. You do not think humans would risk one of their own if a lowly *droid* was handy, do you?

We hyperspaced to the Viraxo location. Ace and I planned to sneak up close to the facility and dock. But the *sneaking* part did not go as planned: two planetary fighters turned to engage us almost immediately. I forced them to weave and dodge, which cost them speed, and they fell behind. Emon got onto the tail of one and destroyed it instantly. Our planetary fighter broke away and turned to attack Emon, who now had three of them to deal with. I suppose that made him happy.

Finally, Ace and I snuck to the Platform 5-type facility and docked. I exited the *Otana* and rolled onto the platform surface. I could describe my heroic entry into the facility's depths and my efficient hacking of security systems to free Uncle Antan, but I will refrain. This is Ace's story, not mine.

While I was inside, Ace manned the turret laser and was able to destroy one planetary fighter and damage another. Emon finished them off.

Ace and I waited at the rendezvous point for Emon, who arrived shortly. We docked with him and transferred Uncle Antan to the *Andrasta*. Uncle Antan was so grateful he later gave Ace his treasured Jar'Kai dueling swords. I keep them safe on the *Otana* when Ace is away.

I took the controls again after dropping Ace at the CRS *Defiance*. Later I learned he had received a new rank—Flight Officer. Where was mine?

Reconnaissance Of Imperial Task Force

Ace's second mission, as Flight Officer Rebel Pilot Azzameen, was to locate an Imperial task force and identify the ships attached to it for Alliance High Command. Such missions require pilots to fly dangerously close to some very powerful vessels. Engaging enemy fighters can be disastrous on such missions, as avoiding fire from the capital ships becomes far more difficult. It is not a sight-seeing tour.

Ace and Blue Leader were given A-wings for this duty—wise decision. The A-wings' speed is the pilots' most valuable asset and Ace has always been adept at evasive tactics.

Their orders were to check out three designated search areas. The first was empty, so they continued to the second within a couple of minutes. Blue Leader commented, "I guess we scared them away," but I doubt that was the case.

Search Area 2 was just an asteroid field. Ace didn't hyper out for 6.32 minutes, according to the records. My guess is he took this opportunity to play a round of asteroid billiards, a ridiculous game Emon had taught him. The object was to use one's lasers to knock small asteroids off-course to collide with other asteroids. I do not think either pilot considered possible negative consequences. Some humans never grow up.

Search Area 3, however, was entirely different. The Imperial task force was there, along with several TIEs.

Both A-wings kept their laser energy directed to their engines as they swerved in and out among Imperial task force craft. Positive IDs were eventually made on the ISDII *Corrupter*, the Dreadnaught *Vigilance*, the corvettes *Badlands* and *Malice*, the modified corvette *Kraken*, and the bulk cruiser *Cerberus*.

Complicating matters, the *Corrupter* began launching probe droids. Ace had instructions to destroy any of these he encountered. This meant he had to direct energy back to his lasers, reducing his speed: that meant the TIE fighters would have him and Blue Leader for lunch if he did not dispatch the probes quickly.



Rescue Echo Base Prisoners

A mission type of the highest priority to the Alliance is the rescue of political prisoners or slaves. This is commendable, but I have seen Rebel pilots blow right by an overworked maintenance droid without so much as a "Hello."

Alliance High Command responded fast to the report of captured Rebel Echo Base personnel being held within striking distance. Making the situation more critical, they were being transferred to a penal colony deep in Imperial territory. Rescue had to be attempted immediately.

Ace was X-wing Red 2 in a group of four assigned to cover six Y-wings that would disable the Dreadnaught *VTR-LX*, which held the POWs, as it refueled at a civilian spaceport. Ace was to protect the ATR that picked up the prisoners and escort it back to the CRS *Defiance*.

Recover Imperial Probe

Again, I piloted the *Otana* to the CRS *Defiance* to pick up Ace. And, again, he took over the cockpit without even an "Excuse me." Aeron needed Ace's assistance in obtaining a damaged Imperial probe droid reported in the Saila Na system. She could not reach the droid in time from where she was, but Ace could from his location. We would rendezvous later with Aeron and hand over the droid.

Ace and I hypered out of Alliance space to the coordinates Aeron had given us. The probe droid was there—and so was the Muurian transport *Pelican*, with six R-41 Starchasers as escort. The *Pelican* was a known pirate vessel, so I assumed the R-41s were pirates, too. It was obvious they were there for the probe droid.

After first closing the distance between us and the droid, Ace engaged the Starchasers, sending one spiraling out of control. I blew away the shields of another that passed within millimeters of us. As Ace neared the MUTR, I notified him that the pirates had docked with the probe: it was now in their possession.

Without hesitation, Ace attacked the transport carrying the droid. I, of course, simultaneously used the turret lasers to keep the R-41s at bay. Ace displayed amazing skill, accurately judging the amount of damage he inflicted on the transport while avoiding damage to the attached probe droid. As anticipated, the pirate transport dropped the probe droid and focused on saving itself.

But again Ace accurately calculated the distance between the probe droid and the transport and began a devastating volley of laser blasts into the transport's engine section. The pirate vessel came to a halt and began exhibiting internal explosions.

The remaining Starchaser attempted to get the droid while we were preoccupied with the transport. I guess its pilot was unaware that the *Otana* had a Kalibac Industries MK-09 maintenance droid sitting in the turret. I aimed; he paid.

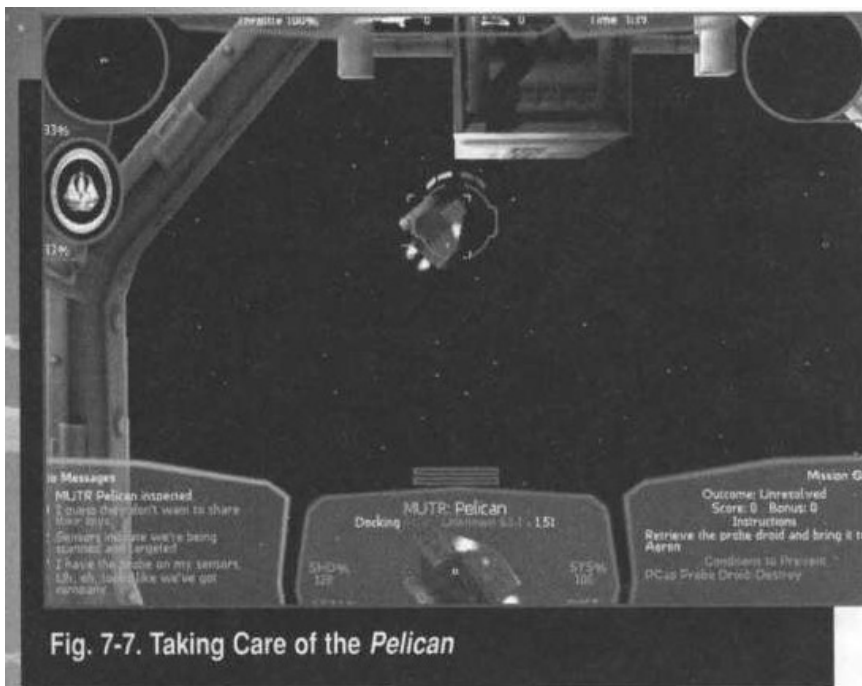
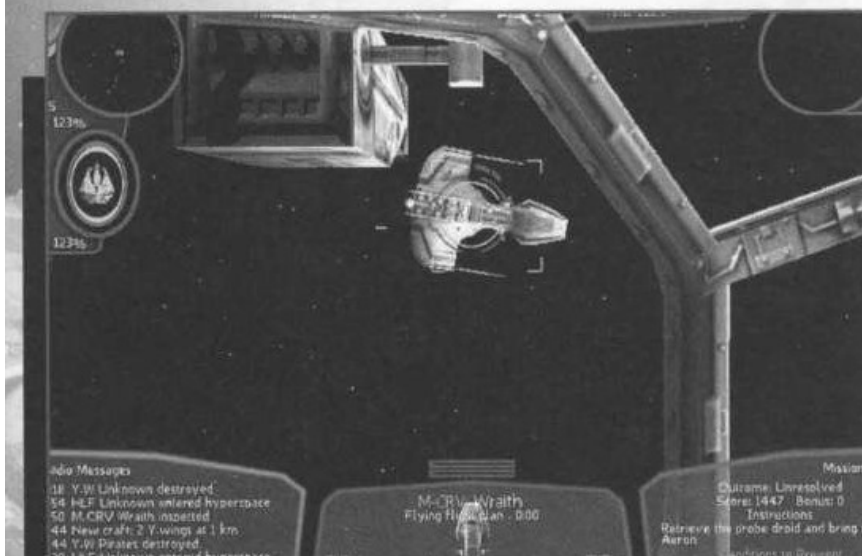


Fig. 7-7. Taking Care of the Pelican

Ace moved in and grabbed the Imperial probe droid. Now we had to make it through a civilian customs checkpoint to reach Aeron. This would require precise timing.

When the customs checkpoint platforms came up on the CMD, so did a group of planetary fighters and two Marauder corvettes. The customs official ordered us to stop our engines and prepare to be boarded. Ace slowed the *Otana*, but never to a full stop. He hoped to gain a little more distance before making a run for the hyper buoy out.

Suddenly, several small objects emerged from hyperspace—a group of hostile, pirate Y-wings. They attacked the civilian cargo station and everything else in their range, including the *Otana*. Ace ordered me to the turret and engaged the pirate ships. It was a heck of a fight! I managed to destroy several torpedoes targeted at us, and Ace ripped through the ships with deadly laser fire.



When the fight was over, the officials thanked us and waved us through customs unmolested. Ace's luck held. We met Aeron as planned, docked, and headed back to the *Defiance*.

The war against the Empire was escalating, and Ace had a job to do. He was a Rebel pilot.

Stop Resupply Of ISD *Corrupter*

Not long after Ace returned from the probe droid mission, the call to scramble was issued. The Alliance had received reports that an Imperial Nebulon B frigate *Monitor* was leading a supply convoy to the ISD *Corrupter*. The convoy carried hyperdrive parts for the *Corrupter*, which had been badly damaged during the battle for Hoth.

The *Corrupter* must be kept crippled, and so the Rebels had to destroy the convoy.

An ambush would take place in the Bettel asteroid drift, through which the convoy must pass. Ace was assigned to B-wing Green. Red and Blue groups comprised X-wings and A-wings to protect the B-wings and engage intervening enemy starfighters. All Rebel pilots had instructions to watch for and destroy any shuttles attempting to flee the *Monitor*: they surely would carry a team of skilled repair technicians destined for the *Corrupter*.

Later, Ace remarked that he was nervous on this mission. He had hoped to log in a few more hours in the B-wing before participating in a large engagement. After reviewing the records, I believe Alliance High Command had no other option. Due to heavy losses at Hoth, good Rebel pilots were few.

As they emerged from hyperspace, the Rebel ambush team was greeted immediately by Imperial gunboats. Ace bore straight toward the Imperial frigate *Monitor*. After all, what were the X-wings there for?

Soon, the blue trails of Rebel warheads sliced through the void and impacted on the vulnerable convoy vessels with devastating accuracy.

Huge explosions erupted everywhere. And Ace was right in the middle. His B-wing was not as fast or maneuverable as other craft, but it packed a heavy punch.

But while he was distracted by all the pretty lights, the FRG *Monitor* entered hyperspace. If I had come along, I could have calculated its estimated departure time when we arrived, and told Ace to fly faster.



Ace turned to help finish off the rest of the convoy, and managed to disable and destroy CTRNS *Vo* just as it was about to escape. Once the area was clear, the Rebel force headed for the *Corrupter's* last known coordinates. At Ace's suggestion, the B-wings turned their attention to the *Monitor* and began pounding it with everything they had. Ace, though, had noticed that four shuttles had slipped through the mayhem, headed out of the sector. Ace took off in pursuit.

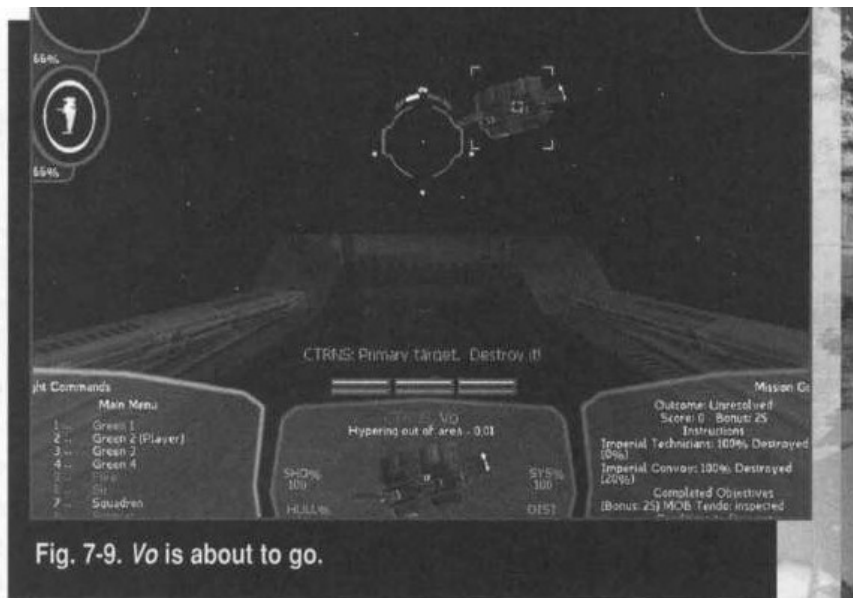


Fig. 7-9. *Vo* is about to go.

He caught up. Extremely accurate laser fire was needed at that moment, and Ace had it. He destroyed all four shuttles in quick succession.

Ace returned to the convoy—and the TIE interceptors and bombers the *Corrupter* had launched. The X-wings and A-wings had reduced their numbers by now, so Ace took out only one TIE bomber before focusing again on the *Monitor*.

For some reason Ace could not recall anything after that, only that the fight ended “in a sudden dead silence.” My research reveals that Ace was credited with having destroyed the Nebulon B frigate *Monitor*, four Imperial shuttles, one Mobquet transport, the Xiy/T *Tilark*, the CTRNS *Vo*, one TIE interceptor, and one TIE bomber.

All in a day's work.

Destroy Imperial Sensor Net

One did not have to join the Rebellion to know the Empire was tightening its grip on the galaxy. The Alliance was still reeling from the disaster at Hoth, and needed more time to rally forces strong enough to defeat the Empire. To accomplish this, the Rebels had to move their current fleet through the Empire's web of control before they were crushed.

A vital aspect of the Empire's encircling web was the Sensor Array Network System, a vast network of satellites linked by Imperial sensor arrays and sensor control stations. The weakened Rebel fleet was trapped, and soon would be found by superior Imperial forces. They had no choice but to attempt escape through a hole in the sensor network.

It was Ace's job to make that hole—well, Ace and five other X-wings ... and six B-wings. I suppose I should mention the ATR group “Cloak,” too. The ATR's task was to jam the station's communications long enough for Ace and his lot to knock out the sensor control station, sensor array, and 18 satellites. This would enable the Rebel fleet to slip through undetected. The Imperials would think it was just another annoying Rebel raid—unless, of course, an Imperial vessel escaped to summon reinforcements. More critical still was not allowing the Rebel fleet to be detected.

Ace wasn't about to let that happen. Often he has said he was more intensely focused during this mission than any previous one. He was not going to let a single Imperial ship get away intact.

The Rebel attack team emerged from hyperspace in a respectable formation. The B-wings wasted no time turning their headings toward the sensor control station. They wanted to knock that structure out quickly, and hopefully prevent most of the station's full complement of Imperial starfighters from being activated.

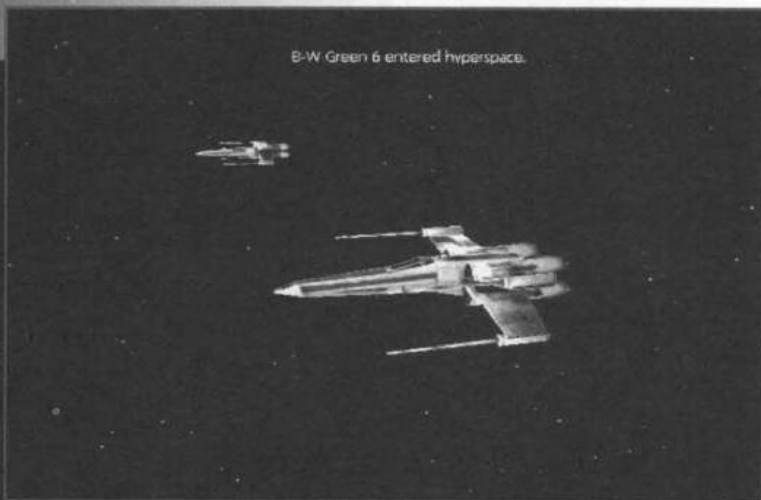


Fig. 7-11. It is always nice to work with professionals.

I would not have placed any bets on that plan, but there was no telling a Rebel pilot that.

The Imperials were not entirely unprepared for this attack. TIE bombers and interceptors were patrolling when the Rebels arrived. But Ace realized at once the Imperial pilots were green: they did not concentrate available forces on the B-wings first. Still, there were enough TIEs to force B-wing Group to approach the station in a less favorable formation.

The sensor control station, greatly damaged (but not devastated) by the first volley of Rebel warheads, launched the remainder of its starfighters. TIE fighters, bombers, and interceptors (six each) swarmed the sector.

For Ace, that meant the battle just got better. It is an Azzameen thing.

Before the station exploded, an Imperial shuttle carrying the station crew attempted escape.

But the shuttle pilot chose the worst possible path for its escape—a head-on course with the craziest Rebel pilot in the galaxy—Ace Azzameen.

Ace fired on the shuttle as the ships rushed straight at each other, blazing away. Ace realized he was not doing damage fast enough to destroy the shuttle before it swept past him and hit hyperdrive. He had only one alternative, he later told me: “I had to ram the sucker!”

Do you think, for one minute, that he considered the possibility of his own demise using this tactic, full shields or not? The impact that would have had on his family? Sometimes I just want to discharge 3,000 volts into that boy.

But it worked. His X-wing was ready for the compactor at this point. Luckily, his wingmates had dispatched the remaining TIEs.

The Rebel fleet slipped through the Empire’s network undetected. The Imperials searched briefly for the Rebels responsible, but never got close. The fleet was safely away into the Outer Rim Territories. For the time being.



Secret Weapons Of The Empire

Alliance High Command had been hearing some strange reports. They received the first with humor, but as more flowed in, the Rebels adopted a serious tone: experimental Imperial starfighters? Not beyond comprehension.

The reports all came from independent transport vessels, which rightly deserved a cautious reception. They could, after all, be sources of Imperial misinformation. Ace had never seen any new starfighters, nor had any other Rebel pilot.

This was about to change.

Ace finally got another chance to fly an A-wing as part of an escort group that was to escort the SHU *Oceana* ferrying the Rebel flight staff to the CRS *Liberty*—a routine transfer. The *Liberty* would be Ace's new home. The TRN group "Azure" went along for the ride, carrying the Rebel pilots' equipment.

The first destination lay in the Belat system. From there, the flight would continue to the *Liberty*. Routine.

The flight arrived in the Belat system as scheduled. They regrouped, scanned the sector, and were about to continue when a distress call came in from a nearby location: a convoy claimed to be under attack by unknown Imperial starfighters.

A-wing Blue 1 and Blue 2 (Ace) were ordered to respond and “check it out.” One does not have to tell Ace twice to head for the action. He was gone.

Ace emerged from hyperspace and assessed the situation. It was not pretty. The Xiy/T *Calico* and its company of Star Galleons, MOBs, and cargo ferries were under attack from, and in danger of being overwhelmed by, a large group of peculiar Imperial craft.

“They were odd-looking things,” Ace remarked. “I had never seen anything like them before. Perhaps these were the experimental TIEs we have been hearing about.”

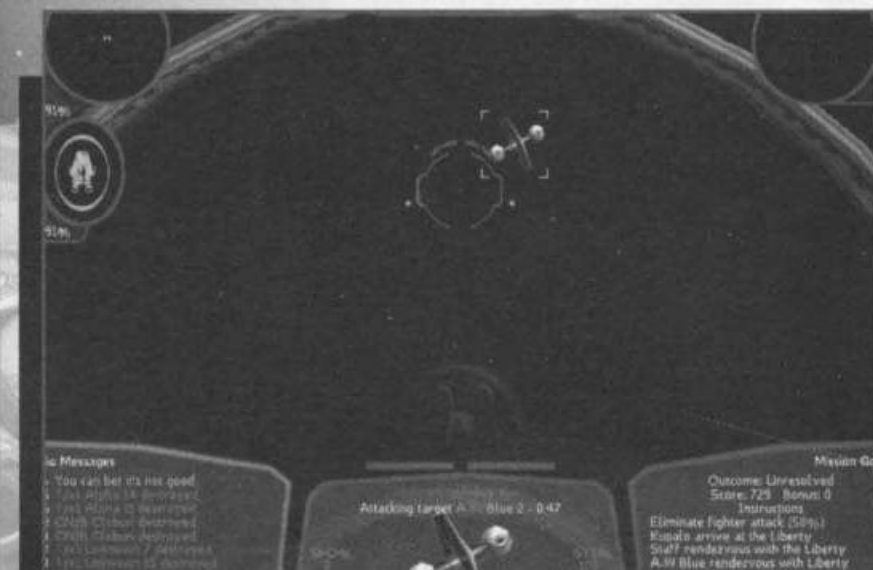
I let Ace believe he had amazing powers of deduction.

It does not take an A-wing long to get to the action, especially with Ace at the controls. He has always had a weird habit of keeping energy shifted to the engines until the very last second, and then putting laser energy to its maximum for combat.

Of utmost importance was preventing any convoy ships from being destroyed. Ace also wanted to ID the “odd-looking things” for Headquarters. Diving into the middle of the swarm was the best approach for accomplishing both goals, he decided.

Sounded like an Emon tactic to me.

Surprisingly, it worked. The experimental TIEs were identified (T/e1s) and their attack formation disrupted. This probably saved one or two convoy vessels. Nothing could save all the vulnerable CN/B containers.



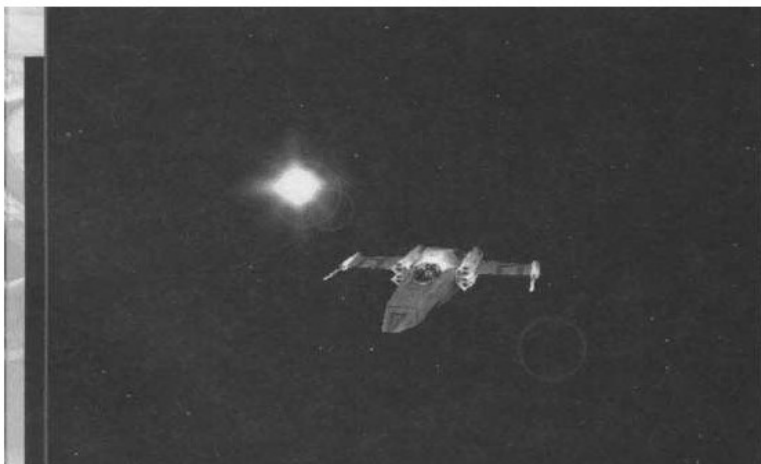
Ace and Blue 1 used their warheads and lasers so efficiently, the experimental TIEs were but fodder. Ace later commented he had thought it strange how the TIEs worked so tightly together, yet seemed to possess no “common sense” or instinctive behavior. This, he believed, made it much easier to defeat them, even though TIEs outnumbered A-wings eight to one.

Ace also identified the ETR *Suluk*, but there was no time to inspect it thoroughly before it was destroyed. My guess was he was too busy blasting it to run a thorough check. After its destruction, Ace noted, the TIEs behavior pattern changed drastically. They seemed disorganized. It was a mop-up operation at that point.

The convoy was saved, except for a few cargo containers and some damage to the MOBs and Star Galleons. Back at the *Liberty*, Ace was credited with 11 T/e1 starfighters and the ETR *Suluk* (I knew it!).



Ensnare Imperial Prototypes



With the information Ace brought back from the previous mission, Alliance High Command was anxious to lay hands on one of the experimental TIE fighters. A plan was conceived.

Ace was to fly a Z-95 Headhunter, outfitted with new ion pulse warheads for quick disabling, as one of a group of six (to disguise their Rebel identity). The Z-95s would then appear as independent escorts for a mock cargo

convoy designated "Sulin". High Command hoped this convoy would lure the experimental Imperial TIEs into an engagement. Ace and his Rebel pals then would disable as many new TIEs as possible. The Heavy Lifter *Atlas* would arrive to pick them up.

All went according to the plan: Ace's pack of Z-95s met the convoy and waited. There were 12 Mobquet transport decoys in the convoy, all computer-controlled to avoid unnecessary loss of human lives. (I am surprised they did not put droids in the transports.)

Ace did not have to wait long. Out of hyperspace came two large groups of TIE experimental starfighters, just as HQ had hoped. With them were two ETRs later identified as the *Suluk 1* and *Suluk 2*.

The Z-95 Headhunter is less maneuverable than a standard Rebel fighter, but in the hands of a pilot like Ace, it was enough. Ace's group responded to the intruders and attacked immediately. Ace was sharp enough to close with the TIEs and get ID on the CMD. He discovered two types—TIEs T/e2 and T/e3. The T/e2, Ace recalled, looked like a normal TIE fighter, but had twin turbo lasers mounted on the side panels. The T/e3 resembled a TIE interceptor with missile launchers mounted on the side panels. Both ships reached speeds of 100, with the T/e3 slightly faster. The Z-95s had no advantage here.

The new ion pulse warheads proved invaluable. Ace disabled two T/e2s and three T/e3s himself. Given the other Z-95s, the sector was soon filled with floating, disabled TIE craft of both types.

Ace did not ignore the ETRs. He remembered the effect it had had on the experimental TIEs when the escorting ETRs were destroyed. He quickly caught up with one and disabled it as he had the TIEs. The second ETR, already severely damaged, was destroyed instantly.

When it was all over, the convoy suffered only one loss. Twelve disabled experimental TIEs awaited pickup by the arriving heavy lifters. The lifters grabbed one disabled ship each: the ETR, an T/e2, and an T/e3. Then they headed back to the *Liberty*. The other Z-95s followed the heavy lifters. Typically, Ace stayed in the area long enough to use the remaining disabled craft for target practice, destroying them all.

It was probably this that secured Ace a new ranking when he returned to the *Liberty*—Lieutenant Junior Grade.

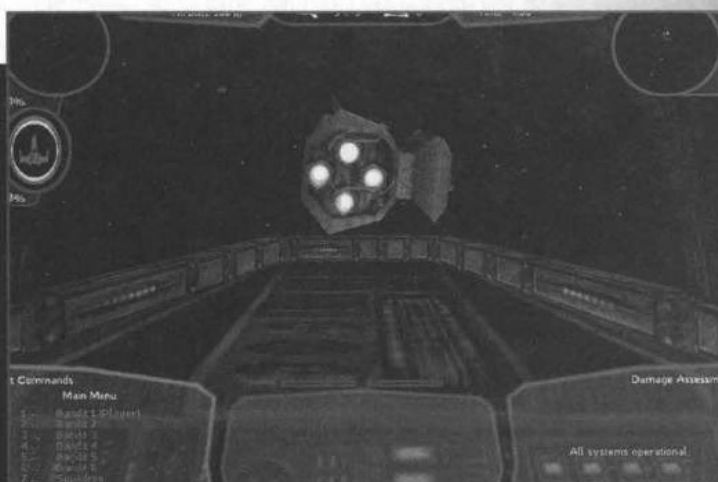


Fig. 8-4. That is a dangerous area!

Kill K'Armyn Viraxo

Having lost Tomaas and Galin, the Azzameens were ripe for revenge on the Viraxos. According to Uncle Antan, that opportunity was at hand. Antan called a family meeting (Aeron communicated remotely; she was elsewhere) to exchange news and conceive a plan.

Of course, this meant I would have to make another boring trip to get Ace. Do not get me wrong, Ace and I are like energy and lasers—we work quite well together. But by now I was becoming less and less thrilled with shuttle duty.

I did not give Ace a chance to be rude this time. I offered him the controls of the *Otana* as soon as he came aboard.

His response?

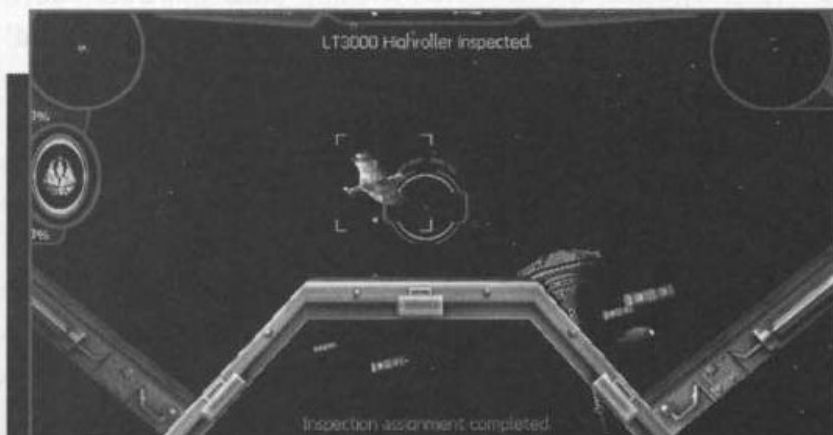
"Naw, you drive. I'll catch some Zs."

My temper circuits almost melted.

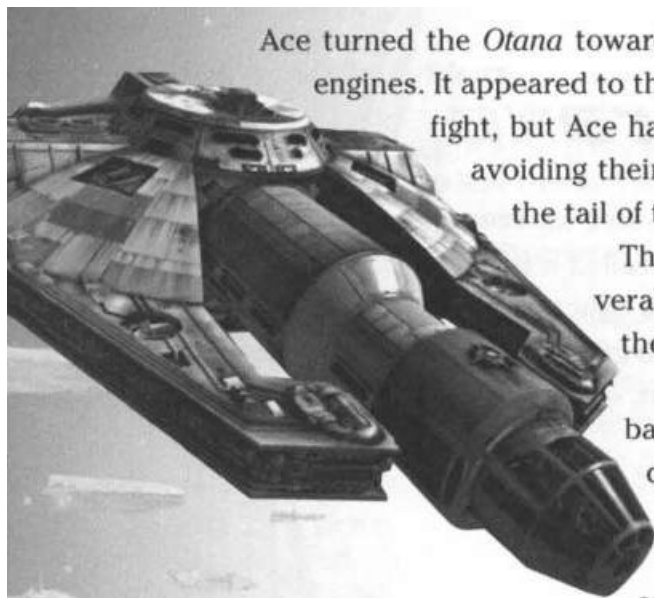
I "drove" us back to Azzameen headquarters, where Antan gave Ace and Emon the plan: ambush the head of the Viraxo family, K'Armyn Viraxo, while he was abroad. Simple and sweet, as Emon would put it. Although Aeron agreed some form of revenge was due, she expressed distaste for Uncle Antan's plan. She was about to say more when communications with her failed. Odd.

Ace and I followed Emon to the hyper buoy and on to *Dresteg II* resort facility. As we emerged from hyperspace, we saw that we were far from alone. Besides the facility itself, there were a Star Galleon, a passenger liner, three bulk freighters, and three Xiytiar transports.

Ace and Emon tried to "blend in," as Emon expressed it, until K'Armyn Viraxo's yacht arrived. I was about to tell Emon this would be impossible to achieve, considering the sensor equipment the other vessels had on board, but I never got the chance.



K'Armyn Viraxo's LT-3000 luxury yacht, the *Highroller*, arrived accompanied by six R-41 Starchasers. Ace and Emon moved quickly and headed straight for the yacht. The escorting Starchasers formed a screen between us and the yacht: these were *not* novice pilots.



Ace turned the *Otana* toward the fighter screen and transferred energy to the engines. It appeared to the Starchasers that Ace was engaging them in a dog-fight, but Ace had other ideas. He blew through the fighter screen, avoiding their lasers, and maintained a high speed directly onto the tail of the luxury yacht. Very clever.

The Starfighters had throttled down for greater maneuverability, and this put some distance between Ace and them. I was proud.

Ace caught up to the yacht, shifted energy back to the lasers, and blasted that LT-3000 into space debris. By now, however, other foes had entered the fray. The MUTRs were firing on Emon, as were six Z-95 Headhunters. The pilots of the Z-95s announced themselves as bounty hunters with a contract on Azzameens. That did not go over well with Emon and Ace.

The Azzameen brothers instantly changed focus to the Z-95s, even though three Starchasers out there were still trying to get a bead on us. I tried my best to keep the other ships off the *Otana's* rear, but there were simply too many lasers, and we took a couple of jolting hits.

Once they had eliminated the loud-mouthed bounty hunters, Ace and Emon wasted not a millisecond in going on the offensive against the others. I reminded them Imperial security forces could arrive at any moment, but they ignored me. It did not take them long to destroy three R-41 Starchasers.

Inevitably, the Imperials arrived, and Ace had the sense to suggest our departure. Emon ordered us out, but not before we had all taken Imperial hits. Had they listened to me

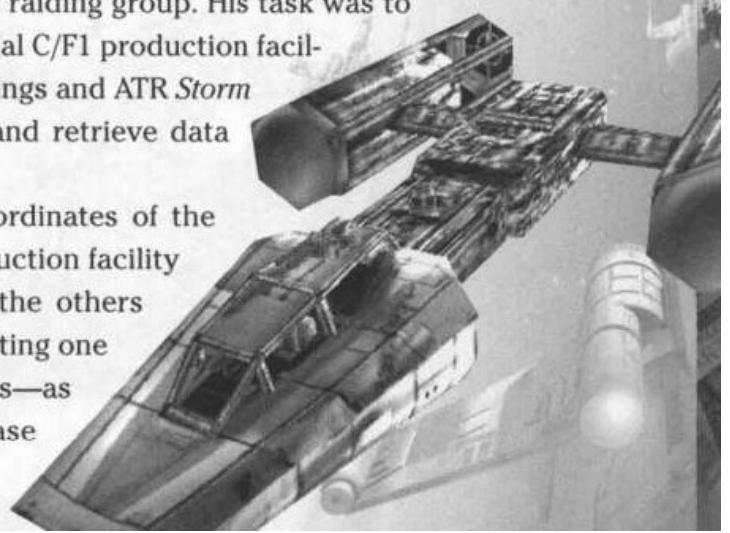
When Ace, Emon, and I returned to the temporary Azzameen headquarters, Uncle Antan apologized for having sent us into a trap. Evidently, his sources had been compromised. I would have to agree. Although K'Armyn Viraxo was not aboard the yacht, I believe Ace and Emon were content.

Raid Production Facility

The new experimental Imperial TIEs received a lot of attention at Alliance High Command headquarters. A raid was organized that they hoped would disrupt the Empire's production of these new fighters.

Ace was assigned one of four X-wings in the raiding group. His task was to destroy the static defenses protecting the Imperial C/F1 production facility. Two A-wings went along as cover for the X-wings and ATR *Storm Unit*, which was ordered to board the facility and retrieve data relating to the experimental TIE project.

The assault group hyperspaced to the coordinates of the planet Nomlis III in the Kurdin system. The production facility was there, orbiting peacefully, when Ace and the others arrived. Ace's group broke formation, each targeting one of the static defenses—the gun emplacements—as ordered. Standard TIE fighters patrolling the base moved to intercept.



The production facility responded quickly, launching waves of experimental TIE fighters types T/e1 and T/e3—far too many for the A-wings to handle alone. Ace destroyed his target (a large gun emplacement) amazingly fast and turned to help the A-wings. Soon joined by the other X-wings, the Rebels tore into the experimental TIEs. The T/e3s, however, were their prime objects, due to their two attached eight-missile launchers.

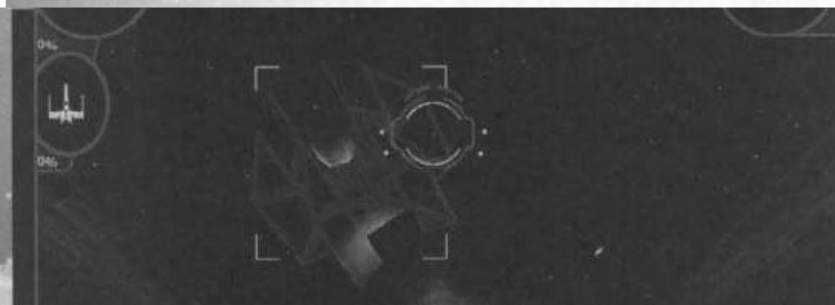
ATR *Storm Unit* stealthily skirted the intense furball and successfully boarded the facility. The Rebels now had to buy the ATR time and, soon, cover its escape.

Ace was well aware the facility had notified Imperial forces nearby and was itching to take that big eyesore out of the picture. I suppose this was what inspired him to fight so feverishly: he destroyed three T/e3s and four T/e1s!

The ATR then made a welcome call: "We got what we came for. Bugging out."

As if on cue, an Imperial force of TIE defenders emerged from hyperspace. But it was too late for the Imperials. Ace turned toward them and disrupted their formation, giving the ATR the distance it needed to escape into hyperspace.

As anyone who knew Ace could have predicted, he remained behind, dueling with the defenders until the other Rebel ships all escaped safely.



I am pleased and proud to tell you Ace made it out safely, too. His awarded credits listed no TIE defenders, but I suspect a couple did not make it back to the Empire.

Defend CRS *Liberty*

Ace hardly had returned from his last mission before the alarm sounded: a large force of experimental TIEs was attacking the *Liberty*!

Ace jumped into the cockpit of an X-wing, and with eight others shot out of the hangar and into the fight. Four A-wings already had engaged, and Ace noted a flight of B-wings joining in. Then a couple of Rebel ATRs appeared.

It would be a big one!

Ace used the CMD to locate the most threatening enemy ships and targeted an oncoming T/e4. There were e3s and e5s in the area, too, but the new e4s literally were flying bombs—*fast* flying bombs—headed right for the *Liberty*.

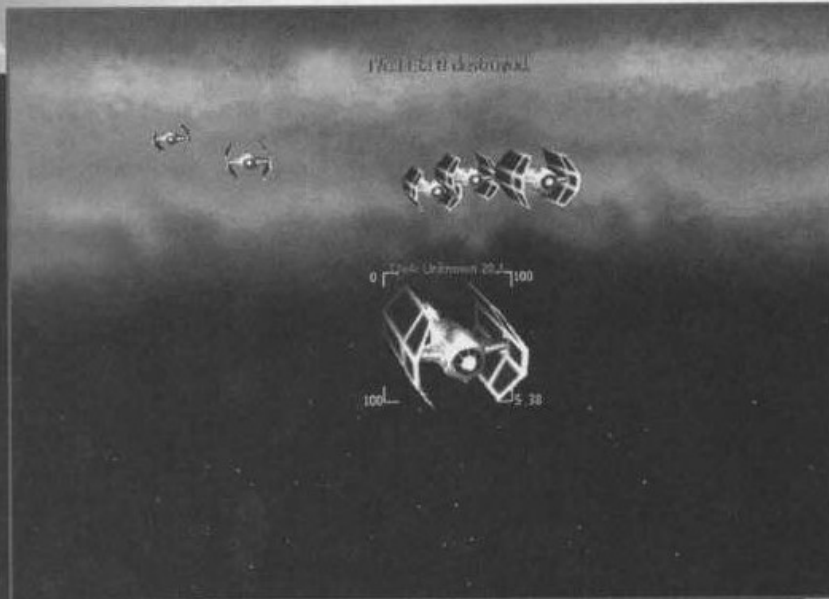


Fig. 8-8. Fast flying bombs can ruin anyone's day.

Ace chose to attack the e4s head-on; they were so fast, he might not get a good shot otherwise. With his laser energy at maximum, Ace took out two in the head-on pass. Then he shifted energy to the engines and turned to get the others before they hit the *Liberty*.

Ace got another e4, but the last one slammed into the *Liberty* with a tremendous explosion. Ace turned his attention to the type e3s, which sported 16 missiles launched on either side. The wave of TIE e4s already had

struck at the *Liberty* once, and were trying their best to slip past the Rebel fighters for another run.

It was not to be. The other Rebel pilots had done their job well, too. The sector was, for a few precious moments, peaceful. Then came the second Imperial wave: again, a large group of mixed experimental TIEs sped toward the wounded *Liberty*.

Trying to stop a large, dedicated wave of extremely fast assault vessels is no walk in the park. When I first downloaded the records of this encounter, I was saddened. More than once a Rebel pilot intentionally sacrificed his or her life to prevent damage to the CRS *Liberty*. Acts of bravery were numerous that day.

The bravery paid off. The assault failed. There were regrettable losses, but not as many as there could have been.

Ace had taken more hits and damage than he ever had, barely landing his X-wing intact.

It was a good day for heroes.

It was a bad day for the Empire.

Destroy Imperial Research Facility

The Alliance had had enough of the experimental TIE fighters. Something permanent had to be done.

That something was an all-out assault on the main Imperial research and production facility. Orders were to destroy any and all Imperial vessels or structures in the sector.

Simple and to the point.

The attacking force consisted of X-wing Red Group for space superiority. B-wing Green Group, equipped with 12 torpedoes, would attack the structures. Ace was assigned to the B-wings. I imagine that made him happy: he could inflict a lot more damage.

The assault force left the CRS *Liberty* in high spirits and engaged hyperdrives a united and determined force.

The Imperials were not expecting such an assault. This was evident by the dearth of fighters and the Stormtrooper transports hovering casually about.

Ace and his B-wing group made a direct course for the PLT/1 *Obsidian*, while the X-wings immediately went after the fighters and transports.

Ace was nearly in range of the platform when he sighted another very large object. Using the scanner, he identified it as a science research ship—the SRS *Sardis*—surely a crucial element to the experimental project.

“I was determined to get a complete ID on that sucker before I blew it to kingdom come,” Ace remarked.



Fig. 8-10. The Object of Your Attention

Eloquent, no. But Ace had the right idea. He changed course and targeted the *Sardis* research vessel. None of the other B-wings followed, but he probably was oblivious to this.

If I were to list the explosions that erupted as the Rebels found their marks, it would be longer than a Wookiee's family tree. Let me just say *it was mayhem*.

There is no stopping a ticked-off Rebel attack force, and this bunch was definitely not happy. Ace ignored every TIE around him and would not let up on his attack on the research ship. He purposely lured two T/e1s to within collateral-damage distance of the *Sardis* just before inflicting the final blasts. They disappeared in the ensuing explosion. Nice move, Ace!

As ordered, the sector was completely empty when the Rebels were finished. (Well, there was a lot of debris.)

The Rebels returned with minimal losses (one X-wing and two B-wings). Ace was credited with destroying the *Sardis*, as well as four CN/Hgrs, four ETRs, one Stormtrooper transport, two T/e1s, one TIE defender, one T/e5, and one T/e2.

Sometimes Ace is so selfish.



Force Commander: Mission To Endor

"Because of your efforts, the Death Star II project is moving forward as scheduled. The Emperor recognizes your efforts here, Brenn."

—Grand General Malcor Brashin to General Brenn Tantor

Imperial General Brenn Tantor commanded a light scouting force that landed on the Forest Moon of Endor. His mission was to reconnaissance three separate sites that were under consideration to serve as the location of the shield generator that would be used to protect the Death Star.

Almost immediately after landing, Tantor's forces were attacked by the natives. Reluctant to engage until he could determine if they were genuinely hostile or merely civilians defending their territory, Tantor was countermanded by his superior, Grand General Malcor Brashin. Brashin ordered him to eliminate all natives that offered resistance and sent down reinforcements for that purpose.

After the three sites were scouted, Brashin selected Site B for the shield generator. Tantor's force eliminated the Ewok city on the site in preparation for the arrival of the Imperial engineers.

Rogue Leader: Prisons Of The Maw

"We suspect there might be some sort of Imperial Installation hidden in the asteroid field. Look for the shield projectors. Be careful, Wedge. The Imperials probably don't want any visitors."

—General Rieekan to Rogue Squadron

In the aftermath of the Battle of Hoth the Alliance leadership suspected that there was an Imperial installation hidden in an asteroid field near the Maw. Three Rogue Squadron members were sent into investigate, and as they approached the field, General Carlist Rieekan cautioned them to be attentive. Wedge Antilles, the Rogue Leader, used his craft's ion cannon to disable a mine in their path.

"Attention Rebel pilot, surrender yourself, and we will show you leniency."

—An Imperial, to Rogue Squadron

In their Y-wings, Wedge Antilles and the other two pilots flew into the asteroid field. One of the pilots picked up a strange sensor reading, and Antilles cautioned them to stay alert, as the signals might have been Imperial. The Rogues then found a group of seven Imperial tankers and a *Lambda*-class shuttle, and their presence was revealed. TIE/LN starfighter squadrons approached to intercept the Rebel starfighters and an Imperial demanded their surrender. The Imperials received no response from the Rebel pilots, who continued on towards their target: a shield projected around the asteroid which housed the facility. Antilles disabled three of the projectors and opened a hole in the shield, and the Rogues descended towards the base on the surface of the asteroid, avoiding the mines spread around the facility.

Antilles reported their progress to Rieekan and then picked up a transmission from the surface. Rebel Karie Neth and a number of other prisoners captured after the Imperial assault on Hoth had managed to break out of the facility, but were desperate for support in order to escape safely. Neth sent out a message begging for someone to hear her. Neth identified herself to Antilles as the leader of the prisoners and asked Antilles and his wingmen to destroy the guard towers protecting the prison building. Neth transmitted targeting information to the Y-wings.

Antilles ordered his wingmen to attack while he destroyed the five towers protecting the prison so the armored hovertrain the escapees had commandeered could move in. A Rebel then reported they needed weapons, and transmitted more targeting information about the weapons storage building so Antilles could bomb the guard towers. Neth then told them to take out the comm relay before the Star Destroyer patrol arrived. Antilles then flew to the other side of the base at the hangars and destroyed the five guns there so the prisoners could hijack an escape craft. He also bombed Imperial walkers, adding to the general mayhem. Flying over the prison command buildings, he bombed them as well, and

was able to recover technology useful to the Rebellion in an atmospheric dome. The surviving prisoners reached the landing platform and escaped in a *Sentinel*-class landing craft. Antilles engaged TIE Interceptors attacking the shuttle until it could enter hyperspace.

"That's it, we're clear. Thanks for the help."

—Neth to Antilles at the end of the battle^[src]

Antilles reported to General Rieeken that their mission was accomplished, and he and his wingmen hyperspaced out to the fleet in the Outer Rim Territories. As the Rogues left, the facility was exploding behind them. Karie Neth eventually joined Rogue Squadron.

THE MASSACRE AT ABRINDON

"Several days ago, we lost contact with our base here. We need to ascertain the situation."

—Grand General Malcor Brashin to General Brenn Tantor

Around the time of the Battle of Hoth, the Abridon Nationalists revolted against the Galactic Empire. With the help of the Rebel Alliance, they won the uprising on Abridon, seizing the capital and destroying the Imperial presence on Abridon.

Grand General Malcor Brashin and General Brenn Tantor were sent to investigate the situation. Swiftly realizing that the planet was in the hands of Rebels, Tantor landed his troops on the outskirts of the capital city and proceeded to retake the Imperial base on the south end of the city, which had been occupied by Rebels. Tantor used the base as a rallying point to call down more reinforcements, weathering repeated assaults from Rebel armor, until he burst out of his fortified position to crush the Rebel base that had been set up near the Government Mound.

Tantor then proceeded across the river, where he seized the Abridon Government Center. In the course of the fighting, he completely cleansed the city of Rebels. With the Government Center taken, his troopers reported the capture of Hamman Flatt, the lieutenant governor of Abridon and a senior Nationalist. Terrified of an Imperial execution, Flatt attempted to trade information for his life. Tantor simply told him, "I don't negotiate with terrorists." Despairing, Flatt simply blurted out his information: the Rebels had sent five high-ranking dignitaries to negotiate with the Abridon Government Council for the planet's entry into the Alliance. Brashin dispatched probe droids to confirm Flatt's story. If true, he promised Flatt a swift, rather than prolonged, execution. Meanwhile, Flatt was simply imprisoned.

"Skywalker's here?"

—Brenn Tantor

Tantor set up a forward base in the gardens at the foot of the Government Mound. With the setting of the sun came numerous Rebel assaults. Tantor was forced to build a strongly fortified base before he was able to send out patrols into the northern outskirts of the city looking for the five dignitaries, whose presence had been confirmed by Brashin's probots.

Tantor was forced to face a still-strong Rebel presence in this area, but his forces eventually tracked down four of the five diplomats, who were brought back to a landing platform to await transfer to a prison ship. The fifth dignitary, however, proved by far the most valuable. When finally captured, earlier half-fantastical reports by befuddled stormtroopers were proved true: Luke Skywalker, the galaxy's most wanted man, was one of the dignitaries. Tantor raced to capture him. Surrounded by Imperial armor and stormtroopers, Skywalker was forced to surrender. Tantor received the exhilarating honor of capturing the man most desired by Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine.

"Sir, Tulon taught me long ago to always act like a soldier, not a murderer. You're ordering the deaths of defenseless civilians."

"You would listen to a traitor over the words of your commanding officer? Destroy the camp!"

"I refuse."

"Say again. I didn't copy that."

"I refuse."

—General Brenn Tantor and Grand General Malcor Brashin

Tantor was sent to destroy the final Rebel position: a strong base to the southwest of the capital. For this mission, he commanded from the Tracked Mobile Base, or TR-MB, a miniature command center inside an armored crawler. Tantor's forces were to meet up with a task force under the command of Colonel Beri Tulon, Tantor's old mentor.

However, before Tantor's forces could rendezvous, Tulon's walker, Annihilator 1, turned on his detachment, killing them all and heading for the Rebel base. Tantor, fearing that his mentor had been killed or captured by traitors, pursued and brought the walker down. He was shocked and distressed to discover that Tulon himself was the traitor, attempting to defect to the Alliance after years of dissatisfaction with the Empire. Tantor, despite his own private doubts about the Empire, dutifully arrested Tulon, who was sent to Tarkin Detention Facility on Ruul.

Tantor proceeded onwards, destroying the base even without Tulon's forces. However, that was not enough of a statement to the people of Abridon for Brashin. The grand general

demanded that Tantor destroy a refugee camp to the east of the base in order to demonstrate the consequences for anyone who allowed traitors to operate freely.

Tantor had finally had enough. Citing the words of the mentor he had just imprisoned, Tantor refused to murder civilians. Infuriated, Brashin locked Brenn out of communications with the army and issued the order to destroy the camp himself, claiming it was filled with Rebels. Helpless, Tantor watched as his soldiers massacred civilians. It was at that moment that Rebel general Tyr Taskeen contacted him. Taskeen, the man whom Tantor had defeated, offered him a frequency on which to contact him if he ever wanted to defect.

"The fighting has lasted for several months now, and doesn't show any signs of subsiding."

—Tyr Taskeen to Brenn Tantor

For his disloyalty, Tantor was sent to Kalaan, where he was to be court-martialed. En route, he contacted Taskeen to arrange his defection. From Kalaan, Tantor rescued Skywalker and joined the Alliance.

"You know that I did everything I could to prevent that massacre."

—Brenn Tantor to Tyr Taskeen

With Tantor and Brashin gone, the Empire was unable to maintain complete control of Abridon. Despite the total defeat of the Alliance, the Empire still had to contend with the Abridon Nationalists, who turned the industrial city of Sayan into an urban war zone. Street fighting with Imperial troops lasted for months, until artillery platforms were stationed in the city and ordered to level it completely. The fighting would go on, until the Rebels initiated a counter-offensive in the liberation of Abridon, under Taskeen and a newly Rebel Tantor.

Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike

Raid At Bakura

Having weathered the loss of the Battle of Hoth, the Alliance to Restore the Republic set about rebuilding their infrastructure. The ace pilots of Rogue Squadron were sent to Bakura to rescue captured scientists.

"Attack the Imperial holding facility orbiting Bakura. Disable the Imperial transports, and give the Rebel evacuation teams time to offload the prisoners from Hoth."

—Mission briefing for "Raid at Bakura"

When the squadron arrived, three Imperial Dropship Transports were already exiting the prison facility with the scientists.

Rogue Leader Wedge Antilles, in his B-wing starfighter, disabled a fleeing Imperial transport carrying a batch of scientists with his ion cannon. A GR-75 medium transport docked with the Imperial ship and evacuated the prisoners. A number of TIE fighters were patrolling the area, and upon receiving a battle alert rushed towards the battle scene.

After completing its docking, the first Rebel transport moved at top speed away from the battle to escape safely into hyperspace. Several TIEs gave chase, but Antilles drove them off. As that happened, a second rescue transport was inbound. Antilles then disabled another dropship transport to recover the prisoners.^[1]

After the third dropship transport was disabled, a TIE Fighter disabled Derek Klivian's X-wing, sending him crashing onto the surface of the planet. Antilles docked with the prison to steal a TIE Bomber to pick him up, as the rescue craft required an accommodation for two. Antilles had to dodge the hundreds of Bakura surface heavy missile batteries littering the surface. Using his bomber's concussion missiles, he managed to break through the defenses and pickup Hobbie.

"This isn't good."

—Wedge Antilles spots the aftermath of the orbital battle

Upon arrival back in orbit, Antilles noticed that debris littered the area. Crix Madine informed him that an Imperial escort carrier made off with a batch of scientists and destroyed one of the transports and several Rebel starfighters, and it seemed it was headed toward Geonosis due to its communication log.

"The situation is well in hand. The Rebels still do not grasp the scope of our plans. Yes, my master, he is resourceful."

—Palpatine and Vader discuss Sarkli's successful retrieval of the scientists at Bakura.

Determined to rescue the scientists, Rogue Squadron would lead an assault team to Geonosis. Likewise, Emperor Palpatine explains to Vader that the Rebels were still unaware of the scope of their plans, implying that the one responsible was one of their own.

Relics Of Geonosis

"Investigate the area around Geonosis for the fleeing Imperial escort carrier."

—Mission briefing for "Relics of Geonosis"

General Crix Madine sent three of Rogue Squadron's T-65B X-wing starfighters to rescue the scientists, and led four GR-75 medium transports, including Rescue 1, to Geonosis. The

Rogues also had additional support craft on their way. Upon arrival in the Geonosis asteroid field, three escort carriers performed a surprise ambush. Antilles ordered the rescue transports to abort their mission, but the lead escort carrier took out a transport while the other two carriers retreated. The abductor revealed himself to be Sarkli, former member of Rogue Squadron and the Rebel Alliance. Antilles managed to destroy his escort carrier, but Sarkli and a few garrisons of stormtroopers managed to survive the blast by using the ship's escape pods, taking casualties in the process due to collisions with asteroids. Antilles's X-wing was caught in the explosion which destroyed his starboard stabilizer and sent him crashing in a canyon near a derelict *Lucrehulk*-class Core Ship.

"System malfunction...Exterminate!"

—Battle droids

Numerous B1 battle droids on Geonosis had been cut off from the deactivation beacon at the end of the Clone Wars. When the survivors of the carrier crash-landed on the planet, several stormtroopers were killed by "native" droids settled in the area, and suffered system malfunctions. As Antilles crashed, they turned their blasters on him. In an attempt to flee the droids, Sarkli used a crashed, but working LAAT/i to escape the area. Antilles now had to deal with waves of battle droids, as well as the survivors from the carrier. Antilles' R5 unit spotted something and started rolling down the canyon.¹ Antilles protected the droid as it rolled forward.

"Who are you?!"

"You know who I am. The Empire maintains order. People like you disrupt that order."

—Wedge Antilles and the defector Sarkli

When Antilles finally came out of the chaos, Sarkli's gunship attacked him. Sarkli then taunted Antilles by telling him that, like Skywalker, he is a coward who is nothing without his forces. Using a dead stormtrooper's E-Web heavy repeating blaster, Antilles shot him down, although not before Sarkli vowed revenge. Antilles then found an old Jedi starfighter from the original Battle on Geonosis with good hull condition, but lacking power. Arfive transferred electricity and power from its circuits into the engine, reactivating it. Antilles and his R5 unit then escaped the planet.

"That escort carrier's shields are down!"

—General Madine to Antilles

Crix Madine's EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate came out of hyperspace and met up with Antilles. The remaining two escort carriers attacked and launched several TIEs, but Antiles found out the starfighter had a payload of seismic charges and repelled them. He also took out TIE bombers which were threatening the frigate. With assistance from the frigate and his wingmates, he dispatched the last two carriers, and jumped into hyperspace with an

old, but still working, hyperspace ring floating nearby.

"Looks like an old hyperdrive unit for this relic! Arfive, can you get it working? Arfive, prepare to dock with it."

—Wedge Antilles to Arfive

At the end of the battle the Rebels returned to the fleet. Sarkli survived his gunship being shot down by Antilles, and would resurface at the Battle of Endor.

Deception At Destrillion

"Infiltrate the Empire's secret research facility. Locate vital targets, and transmit their coordinates to the Y-wing groups."

—Mission briefing for "Deception at Destrillion"

"I have a bad feeling about this!"

—Wedge Antilles before he starts the mission

Alliance Intelligence received information about an Imperial tibanna gas installation conducting scientific weapons research in the Destrillion system. General Crix Madine was given a task force, including the ace pilots of Rogue Squadron to destroy the installation.

The battle Edit

"They've activated some sort of force field. I'm trapped!"

"Wedge, we can't reach you. You're on your own."

—Wedge Antilles and Crix Madine.^[src]

Commander Wedge Antilles of Rogue Squadron flew an A-wing toward the facility. General Madine contacted him and informed him of his mission objectives. Antilles noticed the energy fields protecting the facility included a series of corridors and volunteered to fly through them. In the tunnel, Antilles encountered about two squadrons of TIE Hunters flying around a Tibanna gas platform. Antilles later relayed the presence of the squadron to Madine, and stated that he hadn't encountered them before, with Madine then deducing that they were most likely the Empire's new Hunter line of TIE fighters: The Hunters were a new TIE Series^[1] designed to match the capabilities of the X-wings of the Rebel Alliance.^[3] Madine contacted Antilles and warned him of the dangers the new TIEs posed. Force fields activated, blocking the corridors. Antilles subsequently engaged the Imperial fighters and was able to destroy them with the help of his A-wing's missiles. With the TIEs gone, the force fields deactivated. Antilles then contacted Madine, who ordered the pilot to continue into the second tunnel to locate the facility.

Continuing to the end of the tunnels, Antilles discovered that there was no facility; there was just a convoy of transports about to jump to hyperspace. Antilles contacted Madine with this fact, and Madine ordered him to return to the fleet. In truth, the battle was a diversion in order to lure a Rebel convoy near Dubrillion and destroy it using Dubrillion's superlaser.

Guns Of Dubrillion

When no facility was found and the Alliance fleet led by a MC80 Star Cruiser was about to leave the system, they regrouped and passed through Dubrillion's orbit in order to enter hyperspace. In truth, however, the Empire had planned the Rebels' escape from the Dubrillion system, and when the Alliance fleet was caught in orbit and unable to exfiltrate, the Imperials sprung their trap.

"Retaliate against a surprise attack from a secret Imperial weapon. Identify targets of opportunity and destroy them."

—Mission briefing for "Guns of Dubrillion"

The Alliance convoy was fired upon by an Imperial superlaser on Dubrillion's surface, which destroyed a GR-75 medium transport. As the fleet was not able to do a safe jump into hyperspace, Wedge Antilles was ordered to lead a Y-wing squadron down to the planet.

"Come on, Rogue Group. You didn't think we were finished, did you?"

—Antilles to the Rogues

Alliance squadrons swarmed into the Dubrillion superlaser facility, and came under attack by TIE/LN starfighters and TIE/IN interceptors. Along with the fighters, Imperial submarines emerged from the Dubrillion Ocean. Antilles led a bombing run on the three relay dishes for the superlaser, to reduce the accuracy of the main laser. He disabled the shields on the three relays with his ion cannon, then dropped proton bombs on each, destroying them

. "We're still pinned down by that superlaser!"

—General Crix Madine

While the accuracy of the superweapon was drastically reduced, the Alliance fleet was still taking casualties. In spite of the move to a safer orbit, the fleet was still pinned down. As the facility was also designed to withstand aerial assault, Antilles was ordered to go deep into the facility and shut it down, while his wingmen covered him from the air.

In the midst of the battle, Antilles apprehended an All Terrain Scout Transport by causing an

ion cannon blast to skim across its circuitry, not disabling the vehicle but causing it to temporarily malfunction. Upon hijacking it, General Madine reported that they had scientists who were familiar with the facility's layout, and patched one of them through. The scientist then explained that the only way to shut down the superlaser was to destroy its power sources, citing that the AT-ST he hijacked could get him further into the facility.

Antilles navigated the AT-ST through the superlaser facility, eventually reaching the elevator into the factory guarded by three AT-STs and stealthy missile droids. The enemies opened fire on his walker, but he survived the travel down to the next level.^[1]

The basement level was full of transportation rails. Avoiding explosive containers coming at him from the rails, one of which also destroyed an enemy AT-ST that was on patrol shortly after he arrived on the floor, and engaging more AT-STs, Wedge approached a large open area. While traversing to the next lift, he also exploited the explosive containers to destroy any enemy AT-STs in his path. There, he ditched his AT-ST in the factory in favor of an All Terrain Armored Transport with heavier firepower. With the AT-AT, Wedge was able to plow through the walkers and missile droids in his path, and he opened fire on the three turbines which were powering the superlaser, causing the facility to detonate. Making it back to his starfighter, Antilles and Rogue Squadron were able to escape before a chain reaction of several massive explosions pulverized the base.

Force Commander: Escapr From Kalaan

In 3 ABY, Brenn Tantor and Luke Skywalker were freed by Tantor's stormtrooper unit in the Escape from Kalaan.

During the course of the Massacre on Abridon, Skywalker was captured by Imperial general Tantor and his forces. Skywalker was sent to Kalaan, where he was imprisoned while awaiting transfer to Coruscant and the Sith Lords who awaited him there.

Later in the battle, Tantor refused an order from his superior, Grand General Malcor Brashin, to raze a refugee camp. Tantor was stripped of command and sent to the prison on Kalaan.

Once on Kalaan, Tantor was put in an outdoor cell and informed by Brashin that in the morning, he would be tried, found guilty, and executed. Unknown to Brashin, several factors conspired to foil his plans.

First, Tantor had contacted the Rebel Alliance on his way to Kalaan and arranged with General Tyr Taskeen to defect. When Tantor made it there, Taskeen was ready for him. A small base and several takeoff-ready shuttles waited for Tantor only a short distance from the Imperial base.

Second, Brashin made the mistake of assigning a unit of Tantor's own stormtroopers to guard him. The ten stormtroopers were strongly loyal to the commander who had led through battle after battle, and it was not difficult for Gana Lant to convince his nine comrades to free their general.

"Reporting for duty, General. What's the plan?"

"The plan is you get me out of here."

—Gana Lant and Brenn Tantor

When Brashin left Tantor's cell, Lant arrived, informing Tantor that his guards were ready to defect. Freed by Lant, Tantor hijacked the Tracked Mobile Base, a heavily armored command crawler. He directed Lant's men to storm the prison, freeing Skywalker. With the combination of his own military skills, the Jedi hero Skywalker, the prototype TR-MB, and the unit of stormtroopers, Tantor finally felt that he was in a strong enough position to defect.

The group set out down Kalaan's barren valleys, but couldn't leave the prison without triggering the alarm. Alerted, several Imperial patrols joined the turrets that dotted the canyon walls as threats.

Nevertheless, Tantor was able to overcome the patrols and capture the turrets with the aid of several native Kalaanite resistance fighters and the AT-ST walkers they had captured. After carefully making their way through the valleys, Tantor and Skywalker arrived at Taskeen's base safely. From there, they and their squad were airlifted to Taskeen's fleet, where Skywalker was welcomed back to the Alliance and Tantor was imprisoned until he could prove that he was not an Imperial plant.

Return To Ruul

Having defected, Tantor offered to provide the Alliance with an All Terrain Armored Transport as a sign that he was not a traitor. To do so, however, required the cooperation of Beri Tulon, Tantor's old mentor, who had been assigned to an AT-AT factory for years. The complication was that Tulon had been captured by the Galactic Empire during an attempt to defect—by Tantor, in fact—and was sent to Tarkin Detention Facility on Ruul.

"I'm going to steal an AT-AT."

"What? Are you out of your mind?"

"Quite possibly. You gonna help me?"

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do."

—Brenn Tantor and Beri Tulon

Under the close supervision of General Tyr Taskeen, Tantor took a light force to Ruul, where he set up to ambush the convoy escorting Tulon to the prison. Before Tulon got there, however, a lighter force passed, escorting a captured leader of the Ruulian Rebels. Tantor

swiftly eliminated the guards and returned the leader to his people nearby.

Tulon's escort passed by not long after. Tantor's troopers descended from the hills, bringing down the stormtroopers and walkers that guarded him. Tulon was quickly bundled into a transport and the party rushed to the designated evacuation zone, running into Imperial patrols and turrets along the way.

Once safe, Tantor questioned Tulon as to the location of the factory. Tulon revealed that it was on the asteroid Trasse, but could not be approached without the proper codes. Fortunately, the nearby Imperial computer bank at Sounder Flats would hold such codes.

Still using only infantry and transports, supplemented by the Ruulian Rebels and four of their captured walkers, Tantor subdued the Imperial bases guarding the complex and made a successful information raid, despite several strong Imperial counterattacks. Once Beri Tulon had sliced the codes from the facility, Tantor and his forces faded away as quickly as they had struck.

Permission Granted

Admiral Ackbar and Mon Mothma were examining the holographic star map floating above the desk in Ackbar's quarters when the hatch entry rang. Mothma stepped up and pressed the door control panel. The hatch slid aside, revealing one of the guards on duty in the Mon Calamari cruiser's corridor.

"Councillor, Princess Leia Organa here to see you."

"Send her in," Mothma urged. "Don't hold her up with all your security procedures." She turned to Ackbar. "This overbearing attention to my safety is becoming annoying, Admiral."

"I assure you these precautions are fully necessary to maintain security within the fleet," Ackbar replied.

Princess Leia appeared in the hatchway. "Come in, Leia," Mothma said. "Ackbar and I were just discussing the next series of fleet movements."

"In order to evade Imperial patrols and conceal our true strength, we're preparing several hyperspace jumps out toward the Minos Cluster," Ackbar said, pointing to the holographic system map above his desk. "We won't enter the Cluster, but we have allies nearby, and the adjacent systems have only a token Imperial military presence ..."

"I've come to discuss a matter which isn't really related to the fleet's plans," Leia began. "As you know, Captain Solo was captured by the Empire on Cloud City, and given to Boba Fett."

"Yes, we've been informed," Ackbar said. "Something about the poor man being frozen in carbonite for transport back to that vile gangster, Jabba the Hutt. A most regrettable development. I was hoping

Solo would help us coordinate the arrival of those new Corellian ships when we near Voorlach ..."

Leia's glance told Mon Mothma all the woman needed to know.

"I believe this problem has less to do with the Rebellion and more to do with the princess," Mothma said.

"Yes. I'd like permission to recruit a small group and go after Boba Fett," Leia finally said. "I believe with some of Lando Calrissian's contacts, and Luke and Chewie's help, we might be able to rescue Han."

"We could certainly use Captain Solo's leadership here with the fleet," Mothma said. "But I sense there are other reasons you wish to rescue him."

Leia's eyes dropped to the floor.

Ackbar smiled. "I see. Permission for your rescue mission is granted. Perhaps we can make some arrangements to support your efforts — in conjunction with existing Rebel operations, of course."

"Are you certain I'm not needed here?" Leia asked. "I know there's so much more that still needs to be done ..."

"Standard military theory holds that a force divided cannot win the battle," Ackbar noted.

"Admiral, this is no time to recite your tenets of military strategy," Mothma gently chided.

Ackbar turned to her. "Sometimes military theory can be a metaphor for matters of the heart. My dear," Ackbar said, resting his hand on Leia's shoulder. "Sometimes we must win the battle within ourselves before we fight the battle without."

"He is right, Leia," Mothma agreed. "Take the time you need. We will be assembling the fleet. When you return with Captain Solo, all will be ready to strike a blow against the Empire."

TO: Hissa, Bertroff, Grand Moff,
Kessel System
FROM: Matrin, Quorl, Governor, Stenos
(4160-897-615-85711)

Greetings!

I've arrived at Stenos and taken control of this strange world. We thought the natives here would be trouble, given their physiques and the vicious battling we watched them engage in among themselves during initial surveillance missions.

However, they've taken no notice of us, which is astounding. In fact, it's downright unsettling; surely they know we're here? Surely they must have some reaction to our using their planet? It doesn't make any sense. I've watched them on our surveillance tapes—even in their games, they're brutal. So why don't they care what we do on their world?

I'll look into this further, but I'm baffled. It's become almost an obsession of mine to get them to react. At this point, I'm even considering going into the public square and doing my impersonation of High Prophet Jedgar that you always find so amusing!

Well, Troff, I must go. I'm hearing rumors of a missing statue the Stenaxes are looking for—supposed to be pretty valuable, from what I hear—so I plan to look into that. I'll let you know what I dig up.

*Yours,
Q.M.*



Galactic Weekly NewsStack:

Banned by the Empire and Loving Every Minute Of It!

- 21.05 Luke Skywalker is just an Alliance public relations exercise. DataPage 18732
- 25.02 Rebel Special Operations Team steals Mandalore Sector. "Where are they keeping it?" asks baffled Moff. DataPage 19928
- 26.12 "Oink" is a deadly insult in Gamorrese; Moff Balfour inadvertently starts clan war. DataPage 20177
- 26.13 Reporter identifies site of AT-AT stud farm. Pictures on DataPage 33123
- 28.08 Imperial Royal Guard foils attempted theft of Palpatine's left leg. "I'm hopping mad," says Emperor. DataPage 23671
- 29.91 Due to a bookkeeping error, three Imperial-Class Star Destroyers have inadvertently been reclassified as comlinks, and are now on sale as Naval Surplus at twelve credits apiece. DataPage 44903
- 30.25 TechNotes, Volume 17: The SoroSuub RIP-17 Autochef series can be modified to produce:
- a) food (though this requires more time and effort than you would think).
 - b) detonite (which is what the autochef claims is "food").
 - c) high-quality spice liquor (Just kidding! Apologies to all you Corellians who fell for this!).
- DataPage 00834
- 36.61 Sector Moff mutters insults behind Lord Vader's back; is demoted to corpse almost instantly. "That Vader, he kills us," say Imperial Personnel officers. DataPage 24722
- 37.11 Rebel Security foils unauthorized cloning attempt on General Madine. "I'm beside myself," says General. DataPage 13904
- 37.82 Boba Fett is actually a green, scaly humanoid about 25 centimeters tall. He controls his armor via a complicated system of levers, pulleys, and bits of string. DataPage 83400
- 37.91 Retraction: The editors would like to apologize to Mr. Fett for the above item, and ask that he please quit shooting our reporters. DataPage 83401
- 38.94 Jabba the Hutt to start fast food chain, named Rancor's Nibblepit. Debt defaulters are encouraged to help supply primary ingredients to daily specials to help pay their debts to Jabba. DataPage 46902
- 39.67 Retraction: The editors would like to apologize to Jabba the Hutt and to the next of kin of several of his debtors. The preceding piece should have read: "Debt defaulters are the primary ingredients." We would also like to ask the next of kin to quit whining about it, already. The meals ... sorry, debtors ... in question were deadbeats, anyway! DataPage 46904

In the Unknown Regions

The *Victory-class* Star Destroyer *Iron Fist* orbited high above the planet designated UR41-284. Like so many of the worlds in the Unknown Regions, the small red planet had no official name. in the Imperial charts. If the inhabitants of the world.had a name for their planet, it was not recorded on Captain Ferob's datapad. In fact, little more than the raw planet specifications appeared on the Captain's glowing datapad screen. He knew its orbital path, its gravity, its atmosphere content. He knew where the primitive centers of civilization were, what kind of technology level the inhabitants possessed. But he knew nothing of a personal nature. To him, the planet was just another sphere to be charted as his ship continued its five year mission through the Unknown Regions.

The comm unit beeped once, calling for Captain Ferob's attention. It was the command frequency, which meant that Grand Admiral Thrawn was calling from the planet's surface. Ferob reached for the toggle switch without hesitation. To delay, to keep the Grand Admiral waiting, would be to risk the Grand Admiral's wrath. After serving under Thrawn for almost three years, he knew how terrible that wrath could be.

"Ferob here, sir" the Captain said into the comm. unit, trying to keep his voice steady. He respected Thrawn, he even feared him, but he still had trouble keeping his revulsion to himself. How could the Emperor make this ... this *alien* ... a Grand Admiral?

"The inhabitants of this world refuse to submit to the Emperor's will, Captain Ferob," Thrawn informed him, his voice full of the calm ruthlessness the Captain had come to know so well since heading into the Unknown Regions with Thrawn. "I am providing you with the coordinates of a portion of the major village cluster. Begin bombardments on my mark. I want you to level everything within a seventy-kilometer radius of those coordinates without touching the coordinates themselves. I want that portion of land to remain intact."

"Understood, Grand Admiral," Ferob responded, entering the orders into his datapad. He ejected the data card and handed it to his first officer, who would pass along the orders to the gunners and make sure they were carried out to the letter.

"A question, Captain Ferob?" the Grand Admiral asked through the still open comm channel.

Perceptive as always, Ferob thought. "If I may, sir," he started tentatively. "What's so important about those coordinates?"

"Art, Captain," Thrawn said, a touch of excitement creeping through his command voice. "The coordinates bound the village cluster's museum district."

"Of course, sir," Ferob said, remembering the Grand Admiral's peculiar obsession. "Should I prepare your pick-up team?"

"In good time," Thrawn responded. "For now, let's teach this world what it means to deny the Empire. You may begin the bombardment, Captain Ferob."

"And then the art, sir?"

"And then the art."

The bombardment began ...

Alliance datafile 2389-B: transcript of Fleet Tactics 241 guest lecture by retired Rear Admiral Michael Unther, Duluur Sector Naval Academy.

"Quiet please. Thank you. Today we've invited a guest lecturer to discuss planetary assault tactics. Rear Admiral Unther is a 20-year veteran of the Imperial Navy whose last command was aboard the Imperial Star Destroyer *Victory*. Before you ask, yes, everything Admiral Unther discusses is possible test material. Remember that your reports on combined fleet and army coordination are due in only four days. We are a bit rushed today as maneuvers are scheduled to begin at 1530, so without further delay, Rear Admiral Unther."

"Thank you, Colonel Truvos. Planetary assaults are perhaps the most complex military maneuvers you will perform. They require complete integration between army and naval forces. They are delicate operations — failure to complete your objectives in time or in the proper way can lead to failure and most likely a court-martial. A planetary assault can be trying on troops, vessels and land vehicles, leaving your forces drained and unprepared for immediate action in another theater.

"There are four stages in a planetary assault. Success and your degree of success in each stage is crucial. (You might want to write this down, as I'm sure this will be on your test.) These stages are approach, orbit, invasion and control. Yes, a question?"

"Sir, what about bombardment? Is there a stage for that?"

"Blasting a planet from orbit is easy — you don't need me to tell you how to do that. *Limited* orbital strikes would occur during the invasion stage. Just hope you are never given a Base Delta Zero order, lieutenant. Ah, yes, another question?"

"Sir, what's the Base Delta Zero order?"

"Base Delta Zero is the Imperial code order to destroy all population centers and resources, including industry, natural resources, and cities. All other Imperial codes are subject to change, as you well know, but this code is always the same to prevent any confusion when the order is given. Base Delta Zero is rarely issued. Any further questions? Good, let's continue ..."

Approach

"During approach, there are several things to consider. Your first decision concerns how close to your target planet you will exit hyperspace. Exiting very close allows you to surprise your enemy, but your fleet may not be fully prepared for battle for an hour or more while you deploy and maneuver. Emerging far from an enemy planet gives the enemy time to notice your approach through the

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key installations and be safe from raids by small groups of enemy ships. This orbit also allows you to control small but important areas. However, if a planet has several spaceports or several large cities, then a single objective orbit will not control enemy supply lines. Now, lieutenant, you could choose to bombard cities, spaceports and industrial facilities to reduce the number of objectives.

"A more risky alternative is the siege orbit. In this case you attempt to place ships all around the planet to prevent enemy vessels from leaving or entering. In this way you can reduce the logistical assets of an enemy if they need to import weapons, food, spare parts or other goods. You can also bombard enemy troops wherever they happen to concentrate.

"The weaknesses of a siege orbit were demonstrated at Hoth. Put up the holo view, please. As you can see here, Lord Vader's fleet was forced to quickly deploy to cover the entire surface of the planet. This was intended to prevent important Rebel leaders from escaping. This unusual situation required a siege orbit, as one ship can slip easily through an objective orbit.

"The weakness of the siege orbit in this situation was enhanced by the Rebels' lack of surprise and their use of a surprising amount of heavy firepower. In an ordinary siege their new ion cannon would have been of little use — the affected vessels are quick to recover from the damage — but when the Rebels' purpose is escape, it is an effective weapon.

"Coming out of hyperspace too close to the system forced the Star Destroyers to rush quickly to their assigned positions and they had little time to deploy proper fighter escort. Though some vessels had time to deploy fighters, many chose not to, sadly thinking that they so badly outclassed the Rebels on Hoth that there was no need for fighter support.

"As you can see here on the holo, when the first Rebel transport escaped there were still several vessels that had not even reached their assigned positions. Here you can see that the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer *Firewind* is far from its assigned position. These are the kinds of errors that can be expected when orders are hastily prepared and hastily executed."

Defense Tactics

"In order to understand attack, you must first understand defense. There are many strategies to defend a planet from attack, many of which you will never see because of the Empire's complete command of space. However, there are some clever defensive strategies that can be performed from the ground or with small units in space.

"Perhaps the most impressive ground defense is the Carigan defense, created by Governor Carigan on his home planet of Bryx before the rise of the Rebellion. Hundreds of ground-based guns were placed near important targets while submersible fighter carriers roamed beneath the seas. When a fleet arrived to deal with the situation, it met with stout resistance.

"At first a siege orbit was attempted in order to strike at the carriers wherever they emerged from under the waters. The carriers would surface all over the planet and send their fighters to strike TIE fighter patrols or escort ships. Any Imperial vessels that got close enough to strike the fighters when they descended into the atmosphere were fired on by the ground-based batteries. The fighters could often remain in range of the largest ground-based weapons during their attack, giving them long range fire support. Any attempt to pursue the fighters back into the atmosphere failed as the many guns destroyed enemy ships and fighters easily in the upper atmosphere.

"When the loss of escorts became too severe, the Imperial commander pulled his ships into an objective orbit over the capital. Now Carigan was free to receive supplies on the other side of the planet — isolated patrols that attempted to stop supply ships were easily picked off by the carriers' fighters. When it was learned that

Carigan had been purchasing large, high-tech weapons from a nearby system and that some of them were already in place, it was clear that a quick attack was the only course to victory. Carigan was getting stronger, not weaker, and the Imperial fleet had already lost many ships.

"The fleet bombarded the capital and all the ground-based guns they could locate. Carigan had wisely hidden many guns and had avoided firing them through the course of the campaign — their locations remained secret until they began to fire on the Empire's dropships descending slowly through the atmosphere. Twenty-five thousand Imperial troops, including two regiments of stormtroopers, died in their dropships having never set foot on the surface.

"Once the landing was complete, neither side had much organization — the stormtroopers had lost too many dropships to continue with their original orders and orbital bombardment forced Carigan's men to remain dispersed. The conflict that ensued took three days and casualties were high on both sides. However, Carigan's men had the advantage. They fought on familiar terrain with the support of the population.

"Once the major urban centers were secured there was still resistance from the submersible carriers, one of which operated for three years after Bryx was conquered and was finally destroyed

when forced to surface because of a faulty oxygen tank.

"You are not likely to encounter the Carigan defense today. It requires a great deal of equipment and time to prepare. Only a planetary governor who knows he and his planet are going to secede from the Empire years in advance will be capable of using this technique.

"You are far more likely to encounter a common tactic used by the Alliance called the space-snipe. In this defense, groups of fighters, usually X-wings, are placed in key hiding places around a system. Asteroid fields, gas giants, planets with large oceans or thick cloud cover all hide small fighter bases. These bases work in tandem to attack isolated ships, including supply ships jumping into the system. This can make a siege orbit very dangerous, again forcing you to move into an objective orbit for the safety found in numbers. It can also make extended operations difficult. The longer you stay, the more ships you will lose to quick raids.

"I fought against this defense at Gorbah while the Imperial Army tried to gain control of the planet. I lost two frigates, a cruiser and a full wing of fighters in the first two weeks. This was all from four hidden fighter bases where the largest vessel was a single B-wing. This forced an objective orbit that limited our ability to lend fire support to the Imperial Army troops on the surface. If troops were fighting too far away from Gorbah's capital, we simply could not help them without moving the whole fleet. Small groups of ships deployed in siege orbit were just too vulnerable.

"The fight dragged on for three weeks. During this period I lost a squadron of fighters and the Moff lost four of his supply ships. Once the planet was captured, the enemy abandoned their bases and fled the system."

Invasion

"While you will not be responsible for ground invasions, it will be necessary for you to assist and understand them. The first and most useful task you can perform is battling a planetary shield. These devices can reach full strength in only a few minutes. They consume energy at very high rates and are expensive to leave on all the time. They are usually only turned on when hostile forces arrive. If you can destroy a planetary shield generator in the few minutes it takes to fully raise the shield itself, your mission and the army's mission will be far easier.

"Many planetary shields do not cover the entire surface — they

protect only the important locations such as major cities or Rebel bases. When faced with a strong shield, your only option is to land troops outside the shield and proceed underneath it, without orbital strike support, and attack the shield generator. This was the only phase of the Battle of Hoth that succeeded. The leading AT-ATs arrived at the generator taking heavy losses only because of unorthodox Rebel snowspeeder tactics. Imperial AT-ATs successfully destroyed the generator on schedule, though many Rebel transports still escaped due to poor fleet organization in orbit.

"In addition to destroying planetary shields, you may be called upon to bombard a planet into submission. When bombarding you must carefully choose your targets. Remember that submission, not destruction, is your goal. When bombarding to cause fear in a population, local landmarks and buildings of cultural significance should be your first targets. These locations often produce no taxable revenue and their loss is a severe blow to local morale. Population centers should also be targeted. Without serious casualties among the populace, other attacks will only fuel their hatred for Imperial forces.

"Besides knowing what to destroy you should know what not to destroy. Hospitals should not be attacked — they allow the people to gauge the volume and severity of the casualties inflicted, helping undermine morale. Industrial facilities should not be attacked as they are difficult to rebuild and will reduce taxable income if lost. The capital's government buildings should not be attacked. If you destroy the government you will have no one to negotiate with for terms of surrender. The populace may begin to resent their own government if administrative buildings remain undamaged while population centers are being targeted.

"If an Imperial Army invasion is to follow the bombardment, and the objective is complete planetary domination, then you must concentrate on additional targets. Military and civilian leadership should be destroyed in order to confuse the enemy and allow you to set up your own government. Military industries need to be destroyed to prevent Rebels from resupplying if the siege is drags out. All military installations should also be targeted. Bombard all strategic resources, from food storage facilities to fuel dumps, to prevent resupply by the enemy.

"You must also clear safe landing zones. Be aware of what units are landing in certain locations. Don't turn a city to rubble if AT-ATs

are going to try and move through it. Be careful what bridges and other transportation assets you destroy. AT-ATs can cross deep rivers as can repulsorcraft, but AT-STs and troops cannot. Remember that the Imperial Army must gain control of government buildings, media centers, starports and other control areas. Through control of these areas ground forces can control the population.

"Large concentrations of enemy troops can be destroyed by orbital strikes. You should assign as many smaller ships as possible to take fire support orders directly from ground units. If the fire support requests have to go through army headquarters, through naval headquarters and back to a small ship in position, it would take at least 20 minutes, far longer than many firefights. Army units must be able to call directly to naval vessels for orbital assistance. This is where many smaller ships are far more useful than a single Star Destroyer. A Star Destroyer can't be everywhere at once, 10 Carrack-class cruisers can."

Control

"The final and most important stage of a planetary assault is control. You can successfully maneuver, land and capture a planet and still be unable to control the planet. It is nearly impossible to transport sufficient troops across space to effectively fight and subdue every member of a population hundreds of millions strong. You must rule through fear, intimidation and the threat of destruction from orbit.

"First you must learn who you must control. Learn their customs, read their histories. This is an area of tactical study which is often forgotten today, but it can save you lives and equipment. Learn who you are fighting, then you can decide what type of propaganda is likely to work and the best method of delivering that propaganda.

Make certain that all media is controlled by the Empire. Some forms of communication may actually be mass media, so make certain you can identify them. They are the vehicles for your propaganda.

"Blame acts of terrorism and military accidents on those who resist you. Blame the Rebels for causing famines and other hardships on a planet. After a victory bring food to the starving masses, saying that your victory has allowed food to be brought to them. Reward the population when you win and punish them should you lose. The population will quickly learn that their comfort depends on your success and they will no longer assist your enemies.

"Once Rebels lose popular support it is difficult for them to justify their suffering and the suffering of others caused by resistance. Volunteer armies can break up quickly when they can no longer justify their existence."

"Excuse me, Admiral Unther, that is all the time we have for today. The naval maneuvers are about to begin, so we will adjourn for the rest of the class to the observation deck. Please pick up Admiral Unther's hand-out disk on your way out."



Slaying Dragons

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied...

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied...

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied ...

"A plume of smoke from the end of the canyon heralded the approach of the dragon. Veni drew closer to his elder sister as Vici activated her lightsaber."

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied...

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied...

"Veni trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. But Vici was not afraid. Though only 16 years old, she held the mighty power of the Force tightly in her hands. The dragon drew closer."

Vweep! Access Granted...

Shannon Voorson set her story platform aside and turned back to the monitor. "Finally," she muttered. This code had taken longer to slice than usual. Still, she reflected, any code one computer can generate, another can imitate. First Law of Slicing. Now, she thought, let's see if we've found anything interesting...

"Oh, yuck," she sighed when she saw the contents of the file she'd entered: a register of six new Star Destroyers nearing completion at the nearby Kuat Drive Yards. What stupid names they have, she thought -- the *Impervious*, the *Penetrator*, the *Inflexible*, the *Indomitable*, the *Inexorable*, and the *Exterminator*. If I were naming Star Destroyers, she thought, I'd give them names like the *Iron Hand*, the *Raptor*, or the *Titania*. Still, what do you expect from people with so little imagination they let computers come up with their access codes?

Shannon heard voices through the thin pre-fab walls of her room; someone had entered the apartment, and her parents were greeting the visitor. Deciding to investigate, she saved the Star Destroyer files under the password "dumbnames" and shut down her computer's code program.

The Voorson family had been techs at Kuat Freight Port for generations. Most of them had spent their entire lives aboard the station -- they were born in the company Wellness Center, educated in the company school, apprenticed to and then hired by Kuat Port Support Services. They married co-workers, raised their families in company housing, and rarely left the station, even to go so far as the planet Kuat itself. There was no reason to

leave -- the company stores on the station provided everything they needed, the pay and benefits for KFP workers were among the best in the system, and they had the pride and satisfaction of knowing that, as members of the Kuat Engineering conglomerate, they were helping build the finest starships in the galaxy. Still, every so often a Voorson would look beyond the comfortable walls of a station apartment to see what the rest of the thousand-thousand worlds had to offer. Shannon's cousin, Deen, was one of these wandering Voorsons.

"Deen!" she squealed excitedly at the sight of the young man embracing her father. "Oh, Deen, it's you! You're finally here! Where have you been? What have you been doing?" Shannon leapt at the guest.

Her cousin turned to catch her. "Hey, Little Bit, I've missed you! Oof!" He grunted as he tried to lift her off the floor. "You've grown, Little Bit -- let me look at you! You're so tall now, and your hair is so long -- when I left, you were a baby, with braids only to your ears, and Aunt Nell had you sleep with a scarf on to keep them from standing straight up in the morning!"

Nell Voorson nodded, and smiled wryly. "Now I have to keep her from chewing the ends."

"Oh, Deen," said Shannon, "I've missed you so -- come and see my room! It's all different now, and I have my own computer and everything!" She tugged on his hand.

Deen smiled indulgently at the child. "I've missed you, too, Little Bit, but don't you think your parents want to talk to me too?" "Oh, go with her, Deen," said Nell. "You can talk while Johan and I get supper on."

* * *

"I can't believe you're really here," said Shannon, hopping up and down in the center of her room. "It's been four whole years! What have you been doing?"

"Slaying dragons."

Shannon laughed. "No, Deen, really!"

"Really! Well, sort of. Helping to slay artificial dragons -- I've been working as a tech." He took a seat next to Shannon's computer.

"Where?"

"Oh, different places," he said. His dark eyes wandered over the room. "Are you still reading those old stories grandmother gave you?" he asked as he spotted the story platform on her computer.

"Yep," said Shannon, "even though Mother says I should outgrow them, like dolls."

"I don't see many dolls here," said Deen.

"Yep. I like computers now. I'm a slicer. I can slice into anything."

"Anything?" Deen asked, chuckling.

"Anything. So who do you work for? What kind of work do you do? Do you get paid a lot? Do you fix droids, or ships, or what?"

"Hey," said Deen, "one question at a time! I work for some friends I made, right after I left here. They're good friends. I don't get paid a lot, but I like what I'm doing. Mostly I work on ships..."

"What kind?"

"Small starcraft, mostly, but some larger ones, and anything else that my friends need fixed. I have to be flexible."

"What's the hardest thing you've ever had to fix?"

Deen paused. "Well," he said, glancing at the closed bedroom door, "a few months ago, I had to adapt some airspeeders to operate at 20 degrees below freezing..."

"And did they work?"

"Well enough... That's *Vici of Alderaan*, isn't it?" he asked, pointing to the story platform on the computer.

"Yup, it's still my favorite. Vici is so brave."

"One who has the Force need have no fear," Deen murmured. "That's what Vici's grandfather tells her."

"Say," Shannon asked, "did you get a chance to visit Alderaan? Before..."

Deen shook his head. "No. I never did. I wish I could have. But I never had the chance."

"It's not fair," said Shannon, settling on the floor.

"That I never got to Alderaan?" asked her cousin.

"That they blew it up. Stupid Empire. Why'd they do it? Grandmother always said Alderaan was a planet of peace and beauty. There weren't any weapons there. Why'd they do it?"

"Because of that," said Deen, pointing.

"Because of my story platform?"

"Because of that story," said Deen. "That story, and others like it. The stories of Alderaan were more dangerous to the Emperor than any weapon."

"How can a story be more dangerous than a weapon?" asked Shannon.

"Because of the ideas in it. On Alderaan, people still believed in the Force. On Alderaan, people remembered the Jedi Knights and the Old Republic. The people of Alderaan remembered the way things were in the galaxy before the coming of the Empire, before the days of hate and fear. And their stories, libraries and universities held all of the ideas that can destroy the Emperor -- that love is stronger than hate, that people are stronger than weapons, that combined together the people in this galaxy have a strength the Emperor can never oppose." Deen's eyes were shining.

"So the Emperor," said Shannon, "destroyed Alderaan to destroy all these ideas?"

"He tried," said Deen, "but he didn't succeed. He can never succeed. The only way for him to control all the ideas in the galaxy would be for him to kill or enslave everyone in the galaxy, and that's impossible. He can't win. The more crimes he commits, the more people will stand up to fight him..."

"Deen," asked Shannon, "are you a Rebel?"

Deen put a hand to his mouth.

"It's all right," Shannon added, "I won't tell anybody. Not even Mom and Dad. Here," she said, switching to the computer, "look what I found today. Just before you got here. I'll give you a copy if you want..."

"How did you access this?" Deen asked, staring at the list of Star Destroyers. "Do you have any idea... "

"It's easy to slice into Imperial files; they have computer-rigged pass-names. I make up my own codes myself. Usually animal names, like `nerf,' or `bhillen,' or even `dog.' "

"I can't believe this," Deen said, still reading the datascreen. "Do you know what this is worth -- do you know what will happen to you if someone catches you at this?"

"No one's ever gotten past my codes," said Shannon proudly.

"Maybe no one's ever considered investigating the files of a nine-year old girl," said Deen.
"You've got to stop this -- you'll get yourself killed!"

Shannon bit her lip. "Does that mean you don't want copies of the files?"

Mistress Voorson called them to dinner, cutting off Deen's answer.

* * *

Gathered around a pot of stewed bhillen, the family discussed the last four years: Shannon's schooling, Nell's promotion to senior docking supervisor of Kuat Freight Port, Johan and Deen's work as techs. Johan complained about impatient starship captains expecting miracles. Deen told horror stories of combatting heat, cold, humidity, dust, ice, offensive flora, fauna, microbes, and every other threat to machinery on backwater worlds he neglected to name.

"You actually found moss growing in the ships' coolant coils?" asked Johan.

"Yep," said Deen. "Two hours before launch."

"Did you get 'em cleaned up in time?"

Deen grinned. "Skin of our teeth."

"The Force was with you," his uncle said.

Nell frowned slightly. "It's good to have you home, Deen, after so long. I was beginning to think you'd left us for good. And now," she said, "here you are. Are you in trouble Deen? Do you need anything?"

"Nell," her husband protested, "can't a boy fly in without an ulterior motive?"

Deen stared at his plate. "Actually," he said, poking his custard with a spoon, "I was wondering..."

"Ah, here it comes," said Nell.

"My friends," Deen continued, "the ones I work with... They've had some problems lately, lost a lot of equipment..."

"Lost?" asked Nell.

"Uh, yeah, damaged. Beyond repair."

"How?" asked Johan.

"Well ... there were a lot of asteroids, and -- it's a long story, but the point is, we need a Colony Class 23669 power generator, and... "

"Why don't you contact the factory, then?" asked Nell. "If you put your order in now, you could have the generator in six months or less, barring rush orders from Imperial Procurement."

"We need it sooner than that, and we've heard a generator's being shipped out of here to an Imperial outpost within two weeks."

"I don't see what that has to do with you," said Johan.

"Well, see, Aunt Nell, you control the docking stations, and we figured if we could arrange docking clearance, you could slip in our barge driver in place of the Imperials'... "

"I cannot believe," Nell said, "that you are sitting at my dining table talking about hijacking 25 million credits worth of power generator as if you were asking to borrow a speeder."

"But Aunt Nell... "

"You're talking about stealing that generator, aren't you?"

"But... we could pay you... "

Nell's mouth fell open. Johan found his voice. "Deen, do you hear what you're saying? This isn't just another prank, like the time you sliced into the school comm-system with phony evacuation drills... "

"This is treason," Nell finished. "Deen, I don't want to hear another word about these so-called friends of yours. Now, because you're my nephew, I'm not going to turn you in and we're all going to pretend this conversation never happened. Is that perfectly clear?"

The meal ended in silence.

* * *

Shannon couldn't sleep that night. Hearing voices from her parents' room, she crept to their door to listen.

"The Alliance is desperate for equipment, Nell!"

"Do you think I care? Johan, that Alliance will never feed my family or give Shannon an education that'll get her off this station!"

"But the Empire ... "

"... Owns this system, and everything in it. Including us. And they have ways of disposing of traitors. Accidents. Johan, do you honestly believe it was a coincidence your brother died in that reactor malfunction less than a week after he'd repaired those Rebels' ship? Nothing is worth the safety of my family, Johan, nothing. Not the Alliance, not Alderaan ... "

"Not even Deen?"

Shannon didn't stay to hear her mother's answer.

* * *

Deen left the next morning after a tense, silent breakfast. "If you change your minds," he began.

"We won't," his aunt said. "Now drop the subject."

"But if you do," Deen persisted, "I'll be in-system for a few days. Here's a signaller you can use to contact me," he said, dropping the hand-held electronic device on a table near the door. "May the Force be with you."

"Destroy that signaller," said Nell after the door had closed.

"I'll do it, Mom," said Shannon, snatching up the device and darting to the reclamator. The appliance disposed of the morning's trash with a satisfying "crunch" -- but the signaller remained hidden in Shannon's pocket.

* * *

The elder Voorsons behaved as if Deen had never come; if Shannon mentioned his "friends" or his request for aid, she was sent to her room without discussion.

"I can't understand it!" she said to herself on one such occasion. It's not as if the station doesn't mix stuff up all the time, she thought. Mother's always complaining about this-or-that going missing. Bugs in the station net -- that's what she always says. If she gave Deen that generator, everyone would just think it was another computer mistake...

Rolling out of her bed, Shannon flipped on her computer. A few minutes and slices later, she had the list of upcoming exports scrolling across her screen. There it is, she thought, a CC-23669 generator, to be picked up at loading dock 42, at 1430 hours, five days from now. All right, she thought, if I change the pick-up date, Mother will surely notice and stop us. Can't change the dock number either, that would make a huge fuss. But if I changed the

time... How long does it take to link a driver to a barge? Daddy says he can do it in less than an hour -- would two hours be enough?

She changed the pick-up time to 1230 and hoped her mother wouldn't notice. Then she pulled Deen's signaller from under her pillow.

* * *

"Who are you?" asked the security guard. Shannon gulped and tried to look cute and harmless. "Shannon Voorson, ma'am," she said.

"Oh, Shannon," the woman said, recognizing the child, "why aren't you at school yet? What're you doing here?"

Shannon knew that "I'm running away to join the Rebellion," would not be a popular answer to that question. Fortunately, she had come prepared with a lie.

"My daddy forgot his lunch, so's I'm bringing it to him before I go. A bhillen sandwich -- see?" She set her portable computer down and opened the thermabag to thrust it into the guard's face so that she was sure to catch the aroma of Bestinnian tangroot.

"Oh, ah, yeah, sure," said the guard, pulling back and blinking. "Go find your Daddy. I'm sure he'll love it."

"Thanks," said Shannon. She bolted off, thinking that raw tangroot was pretty stinky, but there was no way that guard was going to dig past it and find Deen's signaller.

She continued down the corridor toward her father's work area for a few more steps, ducked into an alcove, peeked out to see that the guard was gone, and then doubled back toward dock 42.

The techs hadn't arrived at the dock yet that morning, so Shannon had no trouble slicing her way into the cargo container with a few connecting cables from her portable computer. After a surprisingly long crawl over, under, and around the generator to the front of the container, she settled down with her book-chips to wait for Deen.

* * *

"You sure this'll work, Deen?" said Boo Rawl, captain of the Rebel barge driver *Long Run*.

"For the thousandth time Boo, yes! My aunt is the docking supervisor at this port. She wouldn't have signalled for us to come if she didn't have everything at this end arranged. I didn't live through the evacuation of Echo Base just to get blown out of the sky by my own family."

"I'm not nearly as worried about your family as I am about what you've done to my sublight engines," said Boo.

"I didn't do a thing to your precious engines, Boo," said Deen, "all I did was add an ST box so the port will read our transponder signal as the Imperial driver's. Standard Operating Procedure, straight out of Cracken's Field Guide -- I do it all the time."

"Yeah, well, you seemed to be getting pretty close to my cobulators with that hydrospanner... "

"Oh, quit griping and hail the port -- we're practically on top of them."

Boo Rawl shrugged and opened a channel. "Kuat Freight Port, this is Drive Craft *36DD*, requesting permission to link with the barge in... " Boo paused to check a datapad. "Loading dock 42."

"Drive craft, your transponder signal is unclear, " said a cold voice from the station, "Please transmit clearance code to confirm your identity."

Boo gave Deen a pointed stare as he sent out the code. "Uh, sorry about the transponder, Kuat," he said, "new tech on board was tweaking the sublights, obviously got a little carried away."

"Identity confirmed," answered the controller, uninterested in Boo's explanations. "Driver *DeeDee*, you are early. Link techs will be at dock 42 at 1430. "

Boo turned again to Deen, who gestured innocence but said nothing.

"Ah, are you sure about that, Kuat?" asked Boo. "My orders say pickup at 1230."

"I will check, *DeeDee*," said the controller.

Boo shut off the comm. "Isn't that one of your aunt's people?"

Deen nodded.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I dunno... "

Kuat hailed the driver: "It seems you are right, driver *DeeDee*," said the controller. "You are listed for 1230... "

Deen smirked at Boo.

"However, there will be a slight delay -- the techs' orders say 1430. They will be back on duty within the hour."

"No problem Kuat, I'll wait," said Boo. He shut down the comm again. "Now what?" he asked Deen.

"We wait for the techs to finish lunch, like you said."

Boo rolled his eyes. "What if Security decides to visit us while we're waiting?"

"Boo, you worry as much as my friend Voren," said Deen. "Security'll be on break too."

"Yeah, off playing Whack-a-Bothan, or Bobbing for Calamari." Boo sighed. "I hate waiting," he said.

* * *

"Finally! I thought they'd take forever!" said Boo as they received the signal that the last of the linking clamps had secured the cargo container to the barge driver. "Kuat, this is driver *DeeDee*," he said, cutting off the latest scarlet-rated offering of Billi B and the Paradise Gang and hailing the station. "I've linked up to the barge here, and I'd like to check the cargo before I leave."

"Go ahead, *DeeDee*."

"All right, Deen," Boo said as he cut the comm. "She's all ours. Let's take a quick peek and vanish before the real barge driver *DeeDee* shows up."

Deen entered the airlock connecting the access hatch on the cargo container.

"Is the generator all right?" asked Boo as Deen entered the hold. "The generator is huge -- you don't really want me to spend two days inspecting... Wait a... "

"What?"

"I saw something move... "

"Hi, Deen!" said Shannon, popping into view. "Is this the generator you wanted?"

"Shannon!"

"Who's the kid?" Boo asked.

"My cousin... Shannon, does your mother know you're in here?"

"Of course not. We'd better get moving."

"We?" said Deen. "What do you mean, we?"

"I'm joining the Rebellion," she answered, hauling out her portable computer. "Now come on, we've got to go."

"Absolutely not," said Deen. "You are going straight back home."

"How?" said Boo. "The dock's been depressurized, and I'm not too thrilled with the idea of calling the techs back, having them unlink us and re-pressurize the dock, explaining the kid to security, and then waiting to get linked up again. I'm not crazy about dragging some poor kid into danger, but we have no choice. She's on for the haul."

"He's right," said Shannon, climbing into the driver cab. "Close those hatches and let's go!"

"But..." Deen began.

"The Imperial driver will be here in... less than 30 minutes," said Shannon, checking her chrono.

"Set our coordinates for hyperspace, comrade," she told Boo.

"Name's Boo. Now keep quiet, kid, I gotta talk to your mom's folks."

Shannon nodded. Deen stood in shock.

"Kuat, this is barge driver *DeeDee*. My cargo is secure and I'm ready to go."

"Affirmative, Driver *DeeDee*," said the controller. "You may leave port when ready; thank you for choosing Kuat Engineering, and please be careful of repair drones on your way out."

"No problem, Kuat," said Boo, "and thanks for everything." He began piloting the barge away from the dock. "This is almost too easy," he said. "Deen, your aunt is the best..."

"What did she have to do with it?" asked Shannon. "I set the whole thing up!"

"What do you mean, you set it up?" asked Deen.

"Mom was too scared to help you -- you knew that, Deen," Shannon said. "So I changed the pickup time."

"And Aunt Nell..."

"Doesn't know a thing."

Boo was astonished. "The kid set this up? I'm impressed. Great cousin you got here, Deen. Though it would've been nice if she'd gotten the techs here sooner."

"Sorry, Boo, I, uh, sort of forgot to change their orders," said Shannon. "How long 'till we can jump?"

"We've just cleared tractor beam range -- let me get past that one drive craft ... Aw, no, I don't believe it!"

"What?" asked Shannon.

"See ahead? That's the real barge driver *36DD*, come to pick up the generator."

"You sure?" asked Deen.

The comm light flashed. "Unknown Driver," said the controller, "return to dock immediately."

The three Rebels looked at each other. "Keep going," said Deen.

"Repeat, " said the controller, "Unknown Driver, return your barge to dock and you will not be harmed."

"Yeah, right," muttered Boo.

The Imperial drive craft positioned itself between the Rebels and the spacelane.

"Get around it!" said Shannon.

"How?" said Boo. "The *Long Run* ain't no snubfighter -- linked to a loaded barge, it moves like a drunken Hutt."

"What's its shield tolerance like?" asked Deen, pointing out the viewport, where at least a dozen TIE fighters were converging on them.

"Oh, beautiful." Said Boo, "I knew this was too easy."

The comm light blinked again. "Unidentified Driver," said a familiar female voice, "this is Senior Controller Voorson with your final warning. Reverse your heading and return to dock 42, or our security forces will open fire."

"Lovely," Boo muttered. "Deen, take the guns. Blast anything between us and freedom."

"Wait," said Deen, "I have an idea -- Shannon, follow my lead," he said, slapping the comm panel.

"Controller Voorson," he said, "call off your attack! We have your daughter." He nudged Shannon.

"Mom, Mom, it's me! Don't shoot!" she said.

The comm panel was silent.

"You think that'll stop 'em?" Shannon asked.

Laser blasts bounced off the driver's shields.

"There's your answer," said Boo. "Take the guns, Deen!"

Deen hit the firing buttons. The small turbolasers managed to hit two oncoming TIEs, and three more were disabled by flying debris. Deen kept firing.

"Rebel Driver," said Nell Voorson, her voice touched with panic, "turn back now. Security will not permit you to escape!"

"We ain't askin' for permission!" shouted Boo, continuing to plow forward. A TIE's solar panel clipped their shields; the TIE flew apart, colliding with one of its fellows.

"Boo, the shields are gonna go any second," said Deen, still blasting at their attackers.

"Rebel barge driver," said Nell Voorson, "this is pointless. Stop now or be destroyed..."

"Sorry, Auntie, there's no going back now!" said Boo.

"Rebel... Deen!" Nell pleaded. "Deen, think of what you're doing -- think of Shannon -- Security won't listen to me!" she shouted, "they won't let you go!"

"I'm sorry Aunt Nell," Deen began.

"Watch the TIEs!" Boo warned; the stream of tiny fighters continued to pour at them.

"We're gonna hit that driver!" Shannon cried as the Imperial barge *36DD* loomed before them.

"Not if they're smarter than we are," said Boo.

Deen bit his lip and Shannon covered her eyes as the drivers converged. Nell Voorson's voice continued to beg for sanity over the comm panel. A bead of sweat rolled down Boo's face. "I don't think they're gonna..."

At the last moment, the Imperial driver ducked beneath the *Long Run*. Their shields brushed, buckled, and collapsed as they zoomed past the other ship and into clear space. Four laser bolts from four different TIEs burst past the *Long Run* just as Boo pulled the jump levers; all three Rebels held their breath as the starlines merged into the blur of hyperspace.

"Are we safe now, Boo, are we safe?" asked Shannon.

"Depends on two things," said Boo. "First, whether or not your mother called ahead to Venir or Renegg for Interdictors... "

"And whether or not we hit somebody," Deen finished. Shannon crept into her cousin's lap and laid her head on his shoulder. All three Rebels remained tense, silent, waiting for either a fatal crash or a jerk out of hyperspace into Imperial custody.

The minutes dragged on. Shannon realized that, whether she lived or died, she would never see her parents again; she began to cry. Deen held her close, wiping her tears and rocking her. "Hey," said Boo softly, "it's been 30 minutes. We're clear."

"We're away?" said Shannon.

Boo nodded. "Free and clear, kid -- welcome to the Alliance."

"Little Bit," said Deen, "I'm sorry I got you into this..."

"I'm not," said Shannon, putting on a smile. "Come on, now, Deen -- let's go slay some dragons."

Secrets Of The Sisar Run

It wasn't the longest of lines, but it certainly had to be one of the slowest.

Pyrron Nox stood there, shifting the weight from his tired left leg to his tired right leg, while organizing the credentials in his datapad. At the very least, the air in the BoSS office was sufficiently scrubbed and chilled to make standing there slightly less of an ordeal.

Faris returned to his place in line.

"Not much progress, huh?" he asked.

"Very observant," Pyrron replied, pulling a datapad of non-human design from his vest pocket.

"Hey, ain't that Wrune's?" Faris asked.

"The observations never cease," Pyrron smiled. "Yeah, it's his. He said he'd be by, but if he was late, to get him renewed."

"Don't tell me Wrune's busy. Come on!"

"No joke." They shuffled forward as the line moved.

"He got his ship fixed up, and he's running for Sprax."

"Sprax? Is he nuts?" Faris lowered his voice, stepping in closer. "Has Wrune grown sick of breathing? Sprax is dirty, you know."

"What are you talking about?" Pyrron shook his head. "He runs Jatayus Outbound, shippers on the Sisar Run."

"There are neutron stars less dense, you know that, Pyre? Jatayus Outbound is Black Sun."

"Oh *please*. Like there's a nasty Dark Prince lurking somewhere pulling all the strings! It's just folklore...spacer stories...." Pyrron's rant had taken them to the head of the line. "And you called *me* naive."

"Greetings Pyrron, Faris," said the clerk behind the glossy white partition. "Usual operating license renewals I take it? How's biz in the vack?"

"None too shab, Lommbo," Pyrron said. "The usual, plus I'm proxying for Wrune Tsalin."

"A'l right. Just a..." If Lommbo's eyes had lids, he would have surdy blinked.

"What is it?" Pyrron asked.

The Nimbanel scrolled down the infocrawl on his datascreer. "I guess you haven't heard. Wrune's dead and his license expired. His ship was impounded, as remuneration for breach of contract with his employer. He was found desiccated, floating in the Ac'ren Spur without a vac-suit."

"Just a shipping business, huh?" Faris whispered.

"I've got to get out of this place," Pyrron said.

Vigo Sprax and Black Sun

"Is that clear?" Kisquar asked the two.

The Wookiee bolted from his chair and roared, shattering a large crystal goblet with a massive paw. His Corellian companion, not as blindingly quick as he often boasted, was cut down by Kisquar's hirelings. The raging Wookiee swung at Shotarr Kass, in blind fury, only to be stopped by the Tunroth Hunter's wicked blade.

The blast door behind Kisquar opened, flooding the small room with orange light. Vigo Sprax stepped in to survey the wreckage that was once a relatively decent office.

"Did they have any questions?" Sprax asked his lieutenant.

"No sir," Kisquar replied.

"Good," Sprax smiled.

A Favor Done...

Bho Vendoll actually considered himself lucky. His ship, the *Tragic Flaw*, was—for once—not living up to its name. The current thrust intermix cowlings seemed to have adequate shielding, and the new hyperdrive compressor coils his employers had supplied him with had specs that would make any spacer grin.

And so, Bho grinned. Dame Fortune was grinning with him since moving up in the "company." It started small, with minor cargo runs up and down the Ac'fren Spur. Then, the jobs got bigger, as did the rewards. Risk, too, increased, but with the current catalog of high-tech goodies beneath the *Flaw's* access grills, Bho could outrun most risks.

He re-checked his technical station read-outs on the new coil. Much of the initialization language was alien to his ship's computer, but the standardized design specs were well off the charts. This thing could make his ship just slip into and out of hyperspace. Good thing, too, since it took him nearly 15 hours to install the equipment and to do so, he had to scrap much of his old system.

With his attention seduced by his ship, it was little wonder Bho missed the door chime. When he peered up from his work, he saw Kisquar and a group of Rodians stood near the aft-hatchway. The tiny avian Mriss looked distinctly out of place near the green-skinned thugs.

"Impressed?" Kisquar asked. The Rodians spread themselves around the avian Mriss with military precision. Their striped suits betrayed the contours of deadly hardware hidden in shoulder-holsters.

"Quite." Bho smiled feebly. With success in the business came new, more powerful supervisors. Bho missed the lower-level ones, the ones he could relate to. Kisquar never joked, never frequented the local tapcafes and spacer cantinas, and probably

couldn't mix a good drink if his plumage depended on it. "This baby's a gem. It'll really make the old girl fly. What is it? A Verpine design? Givin, maybe?"

"Actually. It's one-of-a-kind." Kisquar moved closer, with his entourage stepping closer as well. "You will find it quite useful." Kisquar moved his delicate fingers into his breast pocket, pulling out a small palm-sized datapad.

Bho's eyes skimmed the infocrawl on the tiny screen. Cargo run...*across Periphery terminals...past the Imperial Customs Inspection teams....*

He thumbed the scroll key. Cargo: biowar viral activators?

Bho had once said he would no longer be surprised by his job. He took it back.

"Our employer has found an interested party in the neighboring sector." Kisquar answered Bho's unasked question. "He requires an independent like yourself for the transfer...."

"And if I refuse?" Bho asked, putting the pad down as if it had been contaminated.

"Unlikely. You see, as we speak a purge virus is tearing at your ship's datacore. A by-product of the alien compressor coil, I'm afraid. Some cultures are just not as open to sharing technology as they could be."

A smile appeared on Kisquar's face. "Of course, the alien-translation database can be found at your destination and once decrypted, you will be allowed to retain the coil."

Bho grimaced. Maybe his luck wasn't as brilliant as he hoped. Kisquar knew more about spacers than Bho gave him credit. He hit him where it hurt the most: his ship.

"Okay. You have a deal, Kisquar. Oh, and tell your—I'm sorry—our boss that his irony was not missed. Getting a virus to get me to ship viruses."

"Actually," said Kisquar, collecting the small pad, "it was my idea."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

OKEEFE, PLATT

The Sisar Run is one spot you don't want to get caught breaking rules. Some of the meanest local enforcement agents you've ever seen are roving those lanes; none of them are very lenient. You may have heard about the time old Rars Lefken (drunk, as usual) got into a scrap with one of the Weequay enforcers. It was some three weeks before the medical droid in the next system would let him fly again—though some people still question Rars' ever being allowed to fly in the first place.

Bottom line in Sisar: behave. A lot of us are used to dealing with the Imps, who can't shoot all that well and are even worse when it comes to thinking like spacers. The people running the Sisar Run are smart and have hired some very skilled help, so stay on your best behavior.

Lunch at Terman Station

"Will you look at that!" shouted Caira, suddenly transforming from a streetwise spacer to a tourist.

Melvirre tried to will himself inconspicuous and jabbed a fork into his *cho nor hoola*. They had chosen a table near the rear of the compound to avoid attention, but the effort was failing miserably.

"Right there," said Caira, pointing at a bas-relief partially covered by slickplast posters announcing the latest musical tour of a band whose name was unpronounceable. Behind the peeling layers of posted bills, ancient hieroglyphs depicted long-forgotten Hutt history. "This place is amazing."

"Caira," Melvirre said, trying to draw her attention back from the wall. "The buildings are too cold, the landing pads are grimy, the service is slow, and the *cho nor hoola* tastes like rubber. This place is not amazing."

"But, Mel, look. If these are authentic Expansionist Era Hutt *kucha*-sculpts, they could be worth a fortune!" Mel frowned as he envisioned every grifter and con-job within earshot suddenly looking their way. *Great*, he thought. *Of all the partners I could have, I'm stuck with an Ancient Hutt Folklore and Cultures major.*

Mal Biron sat in the darkness of his luxurious room aboard the passenger liner *Destination: Adventure!* Although he preferred the cabin of his freighter, he knew the old girl was in the hangar bay being restocked and his experience told him things would go considerably faster without him poking his snout in the techs' work. Besides, he trusted the techs; they were some of the best Black Sun had to offer.

The glow from Mal's monitor framed his wizened features and cast an eerie green glow in his ancient-seeming black eyes. The report told the wolfman that three of his smuggler crews had been captured near Ka'Dedus. This would never do.

Mal needed new blood. Loyal and capable servants who knew how to smuggle as well as keep secrets. That was the trouble with this profession. The old conundrum about honor among thieves.

Which wasn't entirely true. Mal had managed to foster an almost fatherly relationship with several very competent smugglers. Kalend Thora, for example, had proven herself a diligent foot soldier for Black Sun.

Still, it was time for some fresh faces. And he knew just the test to separate the cubs from the wolves...

...running the Sisar.

PROG 40135 Sourcefile:
INVIT218.3
432//32 ... 5/45//END

To: My most distinguished colleagues
From: Mal Biron
Re: Employment

I have heard tales of your last few runs, and I must say, I am most impressed. It is operatives such as yourselves that I am interested in meeting with, in four days, at my private bay in Meirm City, Sriluur. I'm in Docking Bay 42. Come around noon.



Clear skies,

אמיר בירון

Mal Biron

The Barani Conspiracy Part One

Good Help is Hard to Find

Bel Att, the lotran, was like most of his species: dedicated, loyal and brutally efficient. His commitment to his employer had made him one of Vigo Sprax's favorite enforcers. He was even privileged enough to know just who he was working for—a rare favor in the secretive world of Black Sun.

Att was paid a handsome retainer to remain available for Sprax's assignments, though he was used only for select duties. Particularly those that required extreme violence administered with cold precision.

The transmission was no doubt sent by his employer's latest "personal companion," Millicent, rather than Kisquar, Att's usual contact. Sprax had a weakness for young lost souls. This one had spoken to Att only once before. Even then he had sensed her power-induced intoxication at giving someone else instructions.

The girl told him that a mining colony in the Verde system—Yen-2 was its unimaginative name—believed it didn't need Vigo Sprax's protection nor shipping companies. Either offense was punishable by extreme measures. The raw defiance shown by the colony's owner could be answered only by the most ruthless retaliation.

Att grunted and drank the last of his belaria juice. He did not enjoy death, but he did believe that beings needed to acknowledge their place in the universe. He had. And Vigo Sprax's new companion had, though with perhaps a bit more relish than the practical lotran thought proper.

He turned his thoughts instantly to the operation. The mining colony was likely to have armed itself in anticipation of Black Sun's enforcers. Miners with blasters weren't particularly dangerous, but Att never took chances. He would assemble a team of killers to accompany him. Vigo Sprax's own retinue of thugs would not do. If they were somehow captured, the Empire could not ignore such a blatant attack. Att himself would never reveal the name of his employer,

but those who worked only for credits were not always so loyal.

He needed someone with little compunction for taking sentient life. Someone totally ruthless and savage. Someone with her own well-trained band of killers ready to strike at a moment's notice. Only one name came to mind: *Yith*.



An Imperial shuttle glided into Yen-2's docking bay. Its five occupants, a major of the Imperial Resource Procurement Bureau, four stormtroopers and an Imperial hover-probe droid emerged and moved briskly into the normally bustling loading bay. This transfer site had been shut down by the owner, Neil Barani, in anticipation of new endeavors.

"Mr. Barani?" Major Stipling asked of the burly man awaiting his arrival.

"Yes, sir. That's me." Neil Barani was a stocky human in his mid-forties. He had started this operation the hard way—working his way from system to system as a miner until he'd hit a few valuable strikes. From these he was able to buy into a new mining colony along with several wealthier off-site investors. Being the only co-owner with any experience, he was appointed Chief Engineer, though he preferred to call himself "Foreman." Barani ran the place well. Few living in his ferrocrete compound could complain about their wages or conditions.

"Where is the sample?" Major Stipling demanded.

Barani didn't particularly like Imperials, but he knew he could never keep word of his most recent find a secret. If he had tried, his operation would have been shut down and he and his miners might have been blasted to bits by the Imperial Fleet. "Here in my hand, Major." Barani handed Stipling a black, rough-hewn rod.

"I must run a few tests," Stipling sighed. The Major turned to the hover-probe. "Zeethrecone," he said passively. "Analyze the sample for impurities."

The vaguely insectoid droid opened its forward hatch and Major Stipling placed the rod inside. It closed slowly, leaving Barani and Stipling waiting anxiously.

After what seemed an eternity, the droid's analysis was complete. "This sample is 97.2 percent pure doonium."

Major Stipling glanced excitedly at Barani. Doonium was one of the fundamental metals used in Imperial Naval shipyards. With the escalating military build-up, the laws of supply and demand had caused raw materials to sky-rocket in value. If Barani's earlier message of a massive strike in the Verde Belt were true, it would make the miner rich and win Major Stipling valuable points for promotion. "This is quite a find," he studied the foreman, hoping to see the eyes of an imbecile easily conned out of his priceless discovery. But Barani's eyes were sharp. "I assume you desire an exclusive contract with the Empire?"

Barani nodded slowly, grinning. He had heard of another mine owner in a similar situation who'd arranged a deal worth more than he could imagine. Barani planned on sharing the profits with his crew, but he would still be fabulously wealthy in only a few months.

"That's right, Major. I want the same deal you gave Turlin Corp. No more, no less."

"That should be easy enough to arrange," Stipling answered quickly. Even Turlin's inflated price was cheap in the eyes of the Empire. Stipling waved at a lieutenant to start drawing up the electronic contract, then nodded and turned to go. He stopped briskly when he felt Barani's rough hand on the shoulder of his pristine uniform.

"We're not done yet, Major."

Stipling turned around in a way that made Barani drop his hand, then stared at the shoulder where the civilian had touched him. He said nothing, but raised his eyebrows in query.

"I've got something you might find even more valuable."

"More valuable than doonium?" Stipling scoffed.

Barani nodded his head, still grinning like a clever animal. "For years we've been forced to ship our ore through Jatayus Outbound or Xizor Transport Systems. I have proof that these companies are tied directly to Black Sun."

Stipling wasn't an Intelligence officer, but he'd suspected as much from the scuttlebutt he'd heard.

"I've got lists. Ships, operatives, enforcers and the big boss in this region. Now that we'll be shipping on Imperial haulers, I don't see any reason to pay Black Sun's blood money."

Stipling wasn't involved enough in Intelligence affairs to know just how valuable Barani's information was. Or how unwise the strong-willed foreman's maneuver was.

Barani pointed to a small black lockbox. It was nearly indestructible, the kind typically used to store company records in case of fire or deep-space disasters.

"That's a very interesting proposal," Stipling grimaced, unsure of how he should proceed on such an important matter so far out of his field.

"The Turlin Corp deal," Barani grinned, "plus a bonus of 12 million credits for me."

Stipling frowned, still unsure. "The Empire will pay handsomely for this information, Mr. Barani, but I'll have to refer the matter to the proper department before I can commit to your demands."

Barani nodded. He knew it would take little haggling to get the Empire to pay handsomely for such a complete report on Black Sun's operations in this region of space.



The *Harbinger* came out of hyperspace just outside the Verde asteroid field. Bel Att piloted the small assault ship. Seated behind him were two dozen of the most ruthless mercenaries he could find. Their leader was the infamous Kerestian assassin, terrorist and mercenary named Limna Yith.

"You mentioned nothing of an asteroid field," she said as the ship plunged into the belt.

Att did not respond. Instead, he focused all his attention on the spinning rocks before him. He piloted the assault craft as he ran his own life—efficiently. There was no wasted motion in his deft hands, no overcompensation. He would guide the ship precisely between two asteroids, then apply minimal spin to narrowly avoid the next.

Those behind him watched tensely. They sighed with visible relief when he broke into an "eddy" of sorts just above a giant, relatively stable asteroid.

"That *was* Yen-2," Att grunted as he powered up the ship's weapons, deliberately speaking in the past tense. The mining complex looked to house upwards of 40 individuals. Its shuttle bay was tucked beneath the loading area and command tower, while personal domiciles stretched out along four arms emanating from the circular center like a cross. Atop the command structure was a massive transceiver, likely powerful enough to send a tight beam broadcast through Verde's Belt.

Under the barrage of crisp green laser fire, the dish exploded in a brilliant but short-lived shower of sparks.

Next the lotran strafed the docking bay, blasting its metal doors into twisted slabs so that none of the mine's shuttles could escape.

"We're going in," the enforcer grunted.



Bel Att was the first through the breach. He had landed the *Harbinger* a few meters from the nexus of the colony's four arms, next to the ruined shuttle bays. He and Yith's men wore space suits under their armor. This allowed them to blow holes in the compound's walls and use the vacuum as a weapon. The miners inside the shuttle bay were already dead or dying—decompressed and frozen. Those elsewhere in the station would likely have time to put on vac-suits before the mercenaries were on top of them, but they would not have time to orchestrate a defense.

Inside the landing bays, doors led to each of the four halls and a lift into the command tower above. Att quickly broke his mercenaries into four-person teams and sent them off down the hallways towards the miners' domiciles. Att, Yith, and two others headed up the lift into the command tower. As he suspected, the doors above were already locked down and sealed from the inside. A few charges from Yith's heavy blaster negated the flimsy doors in a heartbeat.

Att and the others rushed in. A few suited miners fired

from behind a bank of computers. One of the miners remained in front of the consoles and switched off the compound's artificial gravity. His clever trick sent two of the attacking mercenaries bouncing into view where they were quickly shot by the concealed miners. Att and Yith, however, were old veterans at the killing game. Yith blasted the exposed miner before he could regain cover. Att let go of his blaster rifle—allowing it to hover in the zero-gravity—and pulled a grenade from his belt. He tossed it underhanded at the ceiling and watched with

grim satisfaction as it rebounded downward and behind the cover of the computers. Several miners pushed off in an attempt to escape, rocketing from their positions recklessly, but it was too late. The grenade exploded, killing them instantly.

Yith launched herself through the gore, blasting at the doorway between the command booth and the loading bays as she went. The door crumpled under her attack and she rushed through.

Bel Att retrieved his still-floating rifle and followed immediately. He gasped as he raced into the room and saw—stormtroopers!

The four white-clad Imperials fired repeatedly at Yith but couldn't seem to score a hit. Att took advantage of the distraction to stop himself and line up a shot. He aimed carefully but quickly, then fired and took the lead stormtrooper.

Yith was more reckless but her larger weapon compensated for her wild aim. She blasted another stormtrooper, shattering his chestplate. The force of her weapon started the Kerestian spinning and sailing backward however, rendering further shots useless. Yith's bold maneu-



Marshall Ardissio III

ver gave Att time to drop the two remaining troopers.

Then the Imperial hover-probe droid, flailing in the dying gravity with ineffectual repulsorlifts, appeared from behind a bank of computers. Yith waited until she collided with the adjacent wall, righted herself, and pushed off again. This time she let go of her heavy blaster and drew a double-edged hand weapon from her back. Its hyper-sonic vibrations made her arm tingle as she brought it forward. Yith collided with the droid and hacked at it savagely. Her first blow cut deep into the droid's chrome plating, cleanly separating its bulbous sensor-laden head from its finned propulsion system.

Though the robot was obviously out of commission, Yith was about to dismember it completely when a blaster caught her square in the back. Her armor took the brunt of the damage but the blast sent her spinning. Two men in deep-space mining outfits bolted past her and headed for the door back into the command structure. One of them had spun around backward as he glided and fired two blasters at Yith simultaneously. The kick of the two weapons seemed to be adding to his speed and he began to overtake the second man.

Then both of them ran smack into Bel Att—braced across the doorway with a long dagger in his hand. The lotran quickly sliced open the suit of the man with the two blasters and kicked him hard, spinning him back into the loading bay. The other man he held in his firm grip, grimacing when he looked through the clear faceplate to seeing the olive-drab cap of standard Imperial military design.

If it was known that BlackSun operatives had slain an Imperial detachment, Vigo Sprax, and Prince Xizor would be in great trouble.

"What are you doing here?" Bel Att shouted over the comlink.

"I-Imperial business!" the Major squawked. "If you kill me, the Empire will track you to the ends of the galaxy!" It was more bribe than threat.

"Not likely," Att grunted and hurled the officer against the wall. Several of his mercenaries were coming up the lift now and one of them grabbed the man roughly.

"There was an Imperial shuttle amid the wreckage in the docking bay," the mercenary said.

Att pondered the situation for a moment, the Verde Belt had obviously blocked detection of whatever larger ship had deployed the Imperial shuttle. He made his decision as rapidly as he realized his mistake. "Take the Imp and the bodies down to the loading bay and place them in the shuttle, then set it out into the belt. With luck, it'll look like they never made it here."

"No!" the officer cried wildly and tried to escape. The mercenary holding him snarled, threw him down the lift-shaft, then launched himself afterwards.



Yith was still in the station's command center when she thumbed on her comlink. "Come look at this, lotran."

Bel Att was in the loading bay overseeing the launching of the Imperial shuttle and its unfortunate occupants. He moved to the central lift—gravity had already been restored—and rode back up to the command room.

Yith was leaning on a computer console next to one of her mercenaries, her security specialist. Beside the mercenary was an empty black lockbox and in front of him was a glowing vid-screen of garbled text.

"What's that?" Att walked casually closer.

"Most of it's encoded, so I can't be sure," said the mercenary. "But the beginning says it's a list of all BlackSun operatives in the system. Including ties to XTS, Jatayus Outbound, Mal Biron and...Vigo Sprax."

Att grimaced, realizing what the human owner of this station had been about to do. "Destroy it," he said instantly.

"This is worth a thousand times what you're paying us," Yith hissed, an evil look barely hidden behind her face-plate.

"Yes," Att responded simply. This didn't bode well. "And what are you suggesting we do with it?"

Yith grimaced and yanked the datacard from the console. Then she stuck it back inside the lockbox and closed it shut. "I think there are people who would pay handsomely for this."

"No," Att said flatly.

Several other mercenaries emerged from the command room now. Yith pointed to the box. "What's inside is worth a hundred times what the lotran is paying us," she said to the mercenaries. "I say we take it. Att disagrees. There are only two sides here."

Att gritted his teeth at the potential mutiny. "You are under my employ," he said to the other mercenaries. They seemed unsure, so he turned to Yith. "And you should know your place, Kerestian."

Yith screamed and whirled her double-edged vibroblade in a wild arc. Att didn't even have time to scream. The issue had been decided.

The Barani Conspiracy Part Two: Sedri Intrigue

Commander Surlev watched as the pirates fled the expanding phosphorescent cloud that was their space station. Most of them would live, but he had made them pay for ignoring the Empire's authority.

A young lieutenant approached and pointed towards a large monitor on the *Ion Storm*'s bridge, "Commander, four ships made the jump into hyperspace."

"Calculate possible destination coordinates along their last known trajectories. It seems we've smoked out the vermin we're looking for. Alert me when you've located the Kerestian."

Surlev smiled. Yen-2's holocams had captured everything. It hadn't taken long to identify the rogue merc as Yith. She had picked the worst time to flee, or rather, Surlev picked an opportune time to attack. The Novolek Beacon was active today, limiting her hyperspace jump options. Surlev's could dispatch probes or scouts to follow the fleeing freighters and find out which one held a Kerestian. The *Ion Storm* could then pursue and wait for Yith to recover the datacard...and Surlev would soon replace Neomen as captain of this ship.



"Have you heard from our agents yet?" Sprax asked the young girl.

"No, Master," Millicent couldn't help but smile. He was asking *her* for information. She was important. Maybe more important than Kisquar.

"I thought as much. And what of Yith?"

"She was spotted on Abek's Station a few hours earlier. But it seems she escaped. The Imperials were involved."

"Abek told you this?"

"No, master. Our—*your* spies contacted us. It seems Abek had captured Yith, though it's unclear whether he knew about the Barani List."

Sprax tapped his window and watched the sheets of rain envelope his villa. The Imperials had destroyed Abek's shadowport. Although he never cared much

for Abek, the port had shown its share of revenue. He would have to speak to Captain Neomen—or have one of his agents speak to him. Of course, there was the matter with Abek, too. The Nikto had survived this debacle. He needed to be...*debriefed*.

Sprax turned to his new assistant, "Send a communique, Millicent. Tell Abek I would speak with him at once. This conversation with the Nikto will be our last."



Prince Xizor flicked off the monitor. The report was disturbing at best. A possible conflict between Vigo Sprax and the Empire. And just as Xizor was about to engage the hated Dark Lord of the Sith in a game of intrigue. This would never do. "Guri," he spoke into a hidden comlink.

A few moments later, his loyal HRD servant entered the room. "Yes?"

"It seems our good friend Vigo Sprax is having difficulties that involve the Empire. My new agent tells me he is attempting to rectify the situation, but I cannot afford the embarrassment at this time. Contact Gyran's team through the usual channels."

Guri nodded coldly. "Shall our agent inform Gyran to work with Sprax's team?"

"I think not. A little competition works wonders with mercenaries. They hate to fail. They hate to lose even more."

Guri left without saying another word. Xizor turned his monitor back on and pulled up images of Darth Vader. "I wish only that this matter is settled quickly, lest it interfere with more important pursuits," he whispered to himself.



"We are almost there," Gyran glared back into the passenger compartment of his ship, the *Arc Razor*.

Most of his team lay listlessly about the hold, though their weapons remained in their hands. Only the droid, ERYX-4, hovered still, waiting for the hunt to begin.

"Wake me when we have landed," a near-human mercenary growled.

Ket Maliss, the most feared of the group, opened one of his reptilian eyes and snarled a similar warning.

Gyran was not one to argue. He shrugged as the ship dipped into Sedri's atmosphere. The *Arc Razor* dipped into the billowy clouds of the water world and then broke level. Gyran peered out his front viewscreen. The rain cast a screen of slimy drizzle on the transparisteel.

"What are you waiting for? Set us down!" one of the bounty hunters barked.

"It's a big planet, Scuz. I've got to find the target's ship," Gyran answered sharply. "Unless you want to spend the next 40 years treading water, looking for them."

ERYX-4 floated forward and extended a probe into Gyran's sensor system. "There," it said mechanically.

Gyran stared hard at the blip. The duranium and plasteel reflection lines of a familiar hexagonal structure; an Imperial garrison base. It was as good a start as any, and ERYX had apparently downloaded all sorts of personality profiles and performance records on Yith. It was more than an educated guess.

"Okay, there's the abandoned garrison" he turned his attention back to planetfall. "We don't know if she's got any of its systems up and running. I don't want to tangle with turbolaser defenses. I'm gonna skirt the edge of its sensor umbrella, find us a place to land. We're rafting it in."

A few of the younger, less-experienced hunters groaned at that prospect. Ket Maliss only stared forward with determination and ERYX made no indication as to its opinion of the matter.

The Barani Conspiracy Part Three: Code-Breaker

"The bounty hunters our agents employed were defeated, Prince Xizor," Guri said flatly.

"Mal Biron's crew is a resourceful bunch." Xizor folded his fingers and studied the monitor set into his marble desk. "No matter. Sprax will have the list back soon enough. I will reprimand him severely for this inconvenience, but he will not be removed from his position."

Guri nodded, sensed that Xizor was finished with her and left the room.

Prince Xizor turned on his personal HoloNet node and contacted his new spy in Vigo Sprax's organization. "Are you there?" he said quietly.

The voice answered immediately. "Yes, sir."

"Report."

"The Empire hired a group of bounty hunters to hunt our team, but our team escaped. They then outran an Imperial cruiser."

Xizor grinned, amused at the spy's error. It was not Imperial hunters, but his own that faced off against Sprax's underlings, but he did not expect a girl as young as her to understand such machinations.

Xizor would not quibble over this minor mistake, however. Vigo Sprax's weakness for taking in street youths had provided the Falleen Prince with an otherwise excellent spy. It was rare that Xizor communicated directly with one of his spies, but Millicent did not know with whom she was speaking, and it amused Xizor to watch the youth's naked ambition grow as she became more entangled in Sprax's affairs.

"Thank you, Millicent. That will be all for now." Xizor turned off his HoloNet node and smiled as he turned his attentions away from this minor misadventure and back to Darth Vader.

Schemes within schemes, he thought.

From the Databanks of Mal Biron

Subscape Communications message: DS22.44112 HLLJ. FF2

My friends,

My efforts to contact Kalend have failed. I am afraid she is missing and the object you delivered to her has been lost.

I am currently en route to help, but by the time I arrive, I fear that Kalend could be lost as well. You are those closest agents there. Please find her immediately.



Mal Biron.

Transmission 1

Independent Subspace Unit INDI.441 38:9:22

TRANS 1233 Proceeding... connecting ... established. SENDCODE NOW.

To: Imperial Outpost Aurek-Two

From: Yen-2, Verde system

Sirs,

We have discovered something of vital importance to the Empire and need to speak with someone in the Imperial Resource Procurement Bureau. Please forward this message to the appropriate authorities as soon as possible.

Neil Barani, Foreman, Yen-2 Mining Colony, Verde system

Transmission 2

Independent Subspace Unit INDI.441 38:9:33

TRANS 1234 Proceeding... connecting ... established. SENDCODE NOW.

To: Imperial ReProBu Major Stipling

From: Yen-2, Verde system

Major Stipling,

We have discovered a rich vein of doonium. We have decided to keep this discovery secret for fear of criminals in our system. Please contact me at once to discuss terms for the sale of our find.

Neil Barani, Foreman, Yen-2 Mining Colony, Verde system

Transmission 3

Subspace Unit INDI.441 38:9:34

TRANS 1233 Proceeding... connecting ... established. SENDCODE NOW.

To: Imperial ReProBu Major Stipling

From: Yen-2, Verde system

Major Stipling,

Your terms are unacceptable. We would require double that figure to set up an exclusive contract. If you could come to the station and test our find yourself, I believe you will understand.

Neil Barani, Foreman, Yen-2 Mining Colony, Verde system

Transmission 4

Independent Subspace Unit INDI.441 38:9:35

TRANS 1235 Proceeding... connecting ... established. SENDCODE NOW.

To: Director Tasin, Jatayus Outbound, Novor system

From: Yen-2, Verde System

Director,

After careful consideration, I do not believe it in my interest to ship via Jatayus Outbound anymore. I am giving you three standard weeks notice that I am terminating our shipping contract, effective immediately. I have entered a new partnership that no longer requires your services.

Neil Barani, Foreman, Yen-2 Mining Colony, Verde system



Crime and Punishment

"The list is no longer a concern," said Guri, taking her seat beside Xizor in the opulent balcony.

The recital was at the point where the Taungs had slaughtered their enemies, yet in the process, destroyed their own world.

"Well done, Guri." Xizor said, staring through a miniature, delicate set of recital glasses older than the Republic itself. "I trust a full report awaits me back at the palace."

"Yes, my prince. The members of Sprax's smuggler outfit are to be commended for their diligence."

"Quite." Xizor refocused the glasses, peering at the balcony across the auditorium. There, surrounded by red-robed Royal Guards, sat the Emperor, listening to the harmonious strains of *Dha Verda Werda*. Next to him, in gleaming black armor, sat Darth Vader. Xizor grinned at the Dark Lord's discomfort. He was a military man who understood only violence, not culture.

"There is still the matter of punishment," Xizor said almost absently. For a moment, Guri wasn't certain if the Falleen was speaking of the Dark Lord or of Vigo Green. "Call the Vigos for an assembly. Guri, you will get to teach them a lesson. Make sure it is one that they do not forget."

"As always, my prince," said the beautiful woman.

SAFEHOUSES

"Okay, once you hit dirtside, this is your first stop. 16AA889 Starfield Road. It's one of our safehouses. It will give you a safe place to plan and prepare for your mission, so long as you don't give it away. The owners are out of town for a while, but don't worry about that. There's a house computer that will take care of your every need. It's a bit literal so watch what you ask for. However, we've hardwired it to keep from giving our operations away and given it a limited ability to lie for us in case the Imperials show up. All I ask is that you don't force us to test that feature. If you can't make it back to the house, go to apartment 25001 of the StarTower residential block. To get in, you'll have to call up there from the lobby, so ask for Vala and tell them that 'the droid sent you'."

—*Excerpt from security briefing by Major Breslin Drake, Alliance Intelligence.*